The Report Committee for Justin Marc Joshua Weyn-Vanhentenryck
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Dynamic Curves and Poetic Lyricism in Selected Chansons of Jacques Brel

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Robert S. Hatten, Supervisor

John R. Turci-Escobar, Co-Supervisor

Dynamic Curves and Poetic Lyricism in Selected Chansons of Jacques Brel

by

Justin Marc Joshua Weyn-Vanhentenryck

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Abstract

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Justin Marc Joshua Weyn-Vanhentenryck, M.MUSIC

The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

Supervisor: Robert S. Hatten

Co-Supervisor: John R. Turci-Escobar

In this report, I analyze eight of Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel's *chansons*, chosen not for their popularity or Brel's preference, but for their particularities in dynamicism and poetic rhetoric. I open with Brel's first global success, *Quand on n'a que l'amour*, and then discuss the extensive influence of classical music on Brel, especially striking in *Les Désespérés*. Following my examination of text painting in *Les Désespérés*, I proceed with *Les F…, La Dame patronnesse, Quand maman reviendra, Mon enfance,* and *Amsterdam*, with the intent of formulating the groundwork for the dynamic highpoint. Each of these titles builds upon characteristics that punctuate the concept of a single dynamic highpoint through musically motivated narrative properties and dynamic curves. It is only upon arriving at Brel's *Ces gens-là* that I formulate the more complex, less intuitive but more intrinsic principle of the double dynamic highpoint.

The concepts of narrative trajectory and musical agent presented throughout this report are based upon the work of Byron Almén and Robert Hatten. Combining Hatten's gestural theories and Almén's rhetorical patterning opens the door to explaining the narrative properties hidden within the musical discourse and the poetic text. I conclude my report by assessing that most of Brel's *chansons* follow the dynamic curve with the intent of capitalizing on the poetic meaning of the text.

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« Pour moi, la chanson est un dessin. Les lignes, ce sont les mots. Les couleurs sont les harmonies. Et les volumes représentent, pour moi, la ligne musicale. » [1]

-Jacques Brel

"For me, the chanson is a drawing. The lines are the words. The colors are the harmonies. And the dynamics represent, for me, the musical line."
(My translation)

Introduction

On several occasions, Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel explicitly states that his lyrics fall under the general umbrella of *chansons* and that his songs are not poetry. Poetry, he insists, does not define his texts, and simply reading his chansons as poetry does not allow us to interpret them in the way that he wishes.[2] For over 18 months now, this claim has been floating around in my mind as an almost improbable assertion—even more so that it came from the author himself. British socio-musicologist Simon Frith affirms that "unlike lyrical poems […] song words are only remembered in their melodic and rhythmic setting." Similarly, Stuart Chase maintains that a "popular song is the sum of all the patterns of behavior which keep the group from flying into a thousand fragments and help it adapt to nature and survive its environment."[3] In this regard, Brel is not incorrect. If you were to listen to one of his songs, then be presented with just the text, it would be nearly impossible to read it out loud without following the rhythm and musicality of the song. But this is conditional—what if you were presented with the text and did not listen to the song first? No doubt it would change the interpretation of the text.

My report will center around this particular poetic conundrum, not to disprove Brel's claim of not being a poet, but to enlighten the term "lyricist" in the context of the French Chanson and poetic lyricism. For the purpose of my research, I will define poetic lyricism as the interaction between the innate poetic content and the musical setting within a working symbiotic ensemble. The innate poetic content refers to the form, rhyme scheme, and syllabic equations that allow the text to flow as smoothly as the narrative line deems necessary. Similarly, lyricism is understood to describe the musicality of my analysis, both in the music and in the text. A clear distinction between the terms "lyrics" and "poetry" emerges from Brel's statement that his

chansons are not, in fact, poetry. The argument is strengthened by Frith's observation that lyrics lack the structure of poetry, that poetry is not lyrics, and that lyrics are not poetry. My report pursues a middle ground, in that I aim to demonstrate that Brel's contribution to the genre of the French Chanson is best viewed as musical poetry.

I will begin my report by introducing Brel as a hugely influential *personnage* of the French Chanson, particularly in the early 1950s, and will explore what made people connect so strongly to his musical settings. This introduction will be preluded by a short biographical section that aims to give some insight into who Brel was, and will explore the first real "hit" that projected him into stardom. Most notably, I will call attention to the innate musicality of his poetry and his meticulous attention to the details of the French language. I will also show how, starting in 1953, Brel began setting his texts in a musically innovative—yet language-oriented—manner.

As I move forward with Brel's overall treatment of text and musical settings, I will uncover recurrent textual themes. "Textual" pertains to both the poetic text itself and its musical setting, with the music reflecting the lyrics' expressive meaning. Brel's songs can be categorized as follows: observations of city or city life, relationships, love, women, the elderly, *l'amour perdu*,[4] social status, politics, geography, and finally, language itself. As we read his texts, it becomes increasingly apparent just how much Brel *arp[ège] son chagrin*[5] in his songs—how his chansons become an outlet for repressed emotions. This intense emotionalism is expressed most directly through the use of instrumentation and dynamic curves, which themselves become individual narrative agents within the overall subjectivity.[6] As the report evolves, I will present and expand upon these agents by means of Robert Hatten's theories on virtual agency, subjectivity, narrativity, and the interactions between them. Brel himself acknowledges that his

chansons are heavily influenced by classical music, particularly the works of Ravel and Schubert, which make Hatten's theories strikingly relevant while also creating a link between twentieth-century popular music and (mostly) nineteenth-century classical music.

This assessment of overall topics coupled with dynamic and instrumental agents will bring me to the body of my report, which will closely examine the poetic structure of multiple songs. I will show how tempo and rhythm enhance and exemplify textual meaning. This will allow me to examine how expressive techniques reproduce the poetic lyricism present in the text and, rather unexpectedly, in the music itself. Many of the characteristics that we focus on when analyzing classical music also apply to the poetic language as well as the music to which the language is set.[7]

Most of Brel's songs follow a very strict poetic form, which is reflected in the instrumentation and musical setting.[8] In a bid to show Brel's systematic approach to lyrical poetry, I will provide graphs of multiple poems depicting their structural patterning and syllabic emphases, thus establishing the basis for a "theory of dynamic curves and the use of the dynamic highpoint."[9] For the purpose of my report, "dynamic curve" and "dynamic highpoint" refer to two different musical aspects: the dynamic level of the chanson and the characterizing tonal trajectory. Derived from the work of Robert Hatten, Barney Childs, Kofi Agawu, and Joseph Stell, the dynamic curve allows for a clearer understanding of the music via the use of narrative and linguistic strategies. Throughout his chansons, Brel tends to correlate loud dynamics with anger, heavy criticism, or simply, passion. As a result, the dynamic highpoint equates the highest level of loudness, but also the peak (crux) of the text's expressive significance. Throughout his discography, Brel criticizes many aspects of society and each time, at some point in the chanson,

his anger breaks through. This is reflected in the performative numerator (the upper half of the performative and interpretive modules) of the narrative agent (explained below).

I will analyze eight of Brel's chansons, chosen not for their popularity or Brel's preference, but for their particularities in dynamicism and poetic rhetoric. I will open with Brel's first global success, *Quand on n'a que l'amour*, and then discuss the extensive influence of classical music on Brel, especially striking in *Les Désespérés*. Following my examination of text painting in *Les Désespérés*, I proceed with *Les F…, La Dame patronnesse, Quand maman reviendra, Mon enfance,* and *Amsterdam*, with the intent of formulating the groundwork for the dynamic highpoint. Each of these titles builds upon characteristics that punctuate the concept of a single dynamic highpoint through musically motivated narrative properties and dynamic curves.[10] It is only upon arriving at Brel's *Ces gens-là* that we can formulate the more complex, less intuitive but more intrinsic principle of the *double* dynamic highpoint.

It is through a combination of music theory and poetic rhetoric that I "contest" Brel's claim that his lyrics function only as chansons, not poetry. Similarly, my report directly challenges Frith's claim that "good lyrics by definition […] lack the elements that make for good lyric poetry."[11] Brel's chansons, I argue, are infused with all the expressive qualities that make for high-level poetry.

Brel not only had an unquestionable talent for the poetic discourse, but also an equally undeniable interest in the dynamic and harmonic treatment of tones. This musical dimension largely defines my report, particularly in reference to how Brel sets poetic texts.[12] My theoretical approach will revolve around Frith's statement that "how words work in song depends not just on what is said—the verbal content—but also on *how* it is said,"[13] in the general sense of a language schema and its specific rhetoric. These ideas also iterate the usage of a performance

agent, typical of the genre of the French Chanson, and relate to the narrative agent building block.[14]

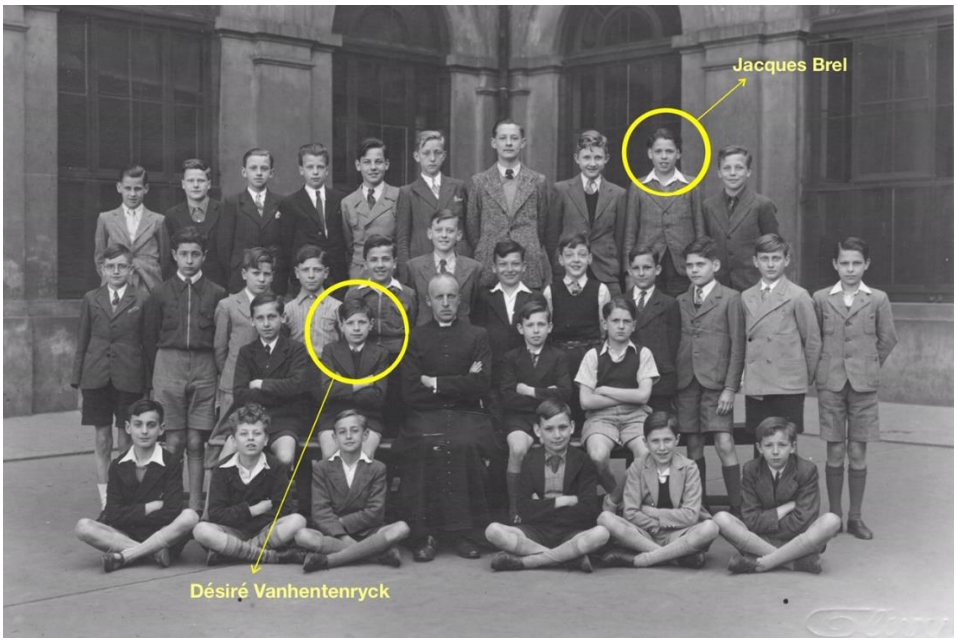
To conclude, I will summarize the Brel *personnage* as a singer, a songwriter, *and* a poet. Frith ends his article on "Songs as Texts" by stating that "the best pop songs, in short, are those that can be heard as a struggle between verbal and musical rhetoric, between the singer and the song."[15] When Brel performs a chanson, his unique command of the stage and passionate theatrics allow him to transcend this "dialogical" struggle.[16] No francophone artist has been able to enact a drama and capture an audience quite like him: compelling storytelling, exuberant charisma, outstanding vocal execution, carefully calibrated sonic effects. This is the story of Brel, the consummate *chansonnier*.

Un personnage intéressant

« C'est marrant, personne n'a voulu que je débute, et personne ne veut que je m'arrête! »[17]

"It's funny, nobody wanted me to start and nobody wants me to stop!"
(My translation)

Jacques Brel was a uniquely talented individual. Even at an early age, his writing in the French language was masterful. Despite this, Brel's dislike for organized schoolwork resulted in grades that did not reflect his talent. Born in Brussels in 1929, he attended *l'Institut Saint-Louis*[18] in the early '40s where, much to his dismay, he had to study Latin and Greek. My maternal grandfather—a former classmate of Brel's—used to say: "I was first of my class in every subject, except in French Literature. In French, Jacques was always first. He was invincible."[19] It comes as no surprise, then, that Brel became a "master of the modern chanson."[20]

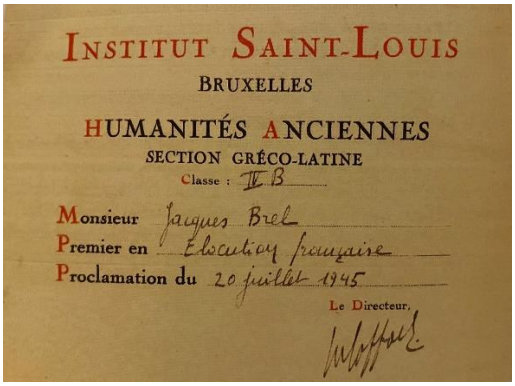


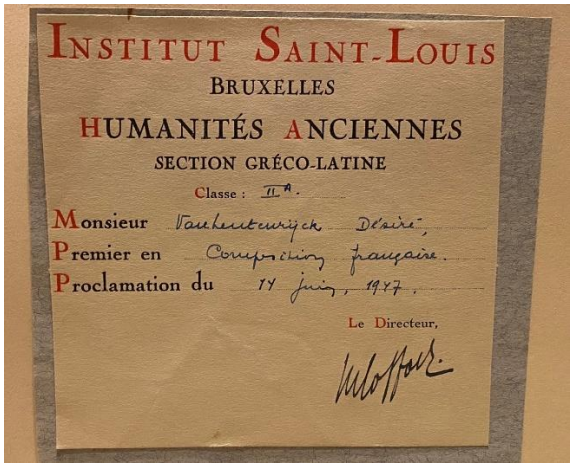
Class photo from *l'Institut Saint-Louis*, 1942-43. Photo courtesy of Catherine Vanhentenryck.

Brel began writing poetry at the age of 12 and composed his first musical settings around the age of 15, when he picked up the guitar for the school "talent" show. His hope at the time was to enact his texts theatrically rather than simply reading them out loud. His musical interpretations were a success, impressing both fellow students and professors. But this success did not transfer to his studies, as he still failed most of his classes—including studies of the Dutch language. Upon graduating from High School, Brel began working—with little enthusiasm—at his father's cardboard factory in Brussels. He continued to write lyrics and, by 1952, was performing songs on the radio, which led to a 78-rpm contract with Phillips records in 1953. His opening record, *IL Y A* (THERE IS), was released in March of the same year.[21] It caught the attention of Jacques Cannetti, the artistic recruitment director of Phillips Records, who was so impressed that he personally invited Brel to Paris to pursue a career in music. Cannetti explains:

> « Jacques Brel, alors inconnu du public, m'a fait parvenir une maquette de disque. Je l'ai écouté un soir de mai 1953 à minuit aux Trois Baudets. J'ai tellement été impressionné que j'ai téléphoné sur le champ à Bruxelles pour faire dire à Brel que je voulais le voir dans les plus bref délais. »[22]
>
> "Jacques Brel, then unknown to the public, sent me a demo record. I listened to it one evening in May of 1953 at midnight at the *Trois Baudets*. I was so impressed that I immediately phoned Brussels to have them tell Brel that I wanted to see him right away." (My translation)

Despite these excellent first impressions, the beginning of Brel's career was not terribly successful. In fact, it started with Cannetti claiming that because of Brel's messy haircut, funky mustache, hillbilly suit, and non-professional—slightly shrunken—guitar, he was "too ugly to be a star." Cannetti insisted that the singer had tremendous talent, but he also believed that Brel would never capture audiences because of his "poor" looks.[23] Nevertheless, in 1953, Cannetti booked him into the *Théâtre des Trois Baudets*, a playhouse that the recruitment director had founded five years earlier and which had featured a number of very successful artists of the French Chanson.[24] It was in this theater that, shortly after meeting his future musical team, Brel began his journey to stardom.


INSTITUT SAINT-LOUIS
BRUXELLES
HUMANITÉS ANCIENNES
SECTION GRÉCO-LATINE
Classe : IV B
Monsieur Jacques Brel
Premier en Elocution française
Proclamation du 20 juillet 1945
Le Directeur,


INSTITUT SAINT-LOUIS
BRUXELLES
HUMANITÉS ANCIENNES
SECTION GRÉCO-LATINE
Classe : IV A.
Monsieur Vanhentenryck Désiré,
Premier en Composition française.
Proclamation du 19 juin, 1947.
Le Directeur,

Jacques Brel's First Place certificate in French Elocution, 1945 (left). First Place certificate in French Composition earned in 1947 by my grandfather, Désiré Vanhentenryck, after Brel had graduated from *l'Institut Saint-Louis*.
Brel certificate courtesy of the Brel Foundation in Brussels. Vanhentenryck certificate courtesy of Catherine Vanhentenryck.

The Hit That Started It All

The start of Brel's career was rocky at best. Although his first chansons caught the attention of "talent seekers," few of them were recorded or accessible to the general public. Brel's early songs did not really capture the audience of the time either, and it was not until 1956 that his career finally took off. That year he met François Rauber, who became his new musical director, as well as Gérard Jouannest, his accompanist and pianist. This close collaboration resulted in Brel's first greatest hit, "*Quand on n'a que l'amour*" (When Love Is All We Have) and, by 1960, he had become an international star, touring constantly and giving more than 200 concerts a year.

What, then, made *Quand on n'a que l'amour* such an instant hit? The answer, I argue, lies in the formula on which the poem itself is built. I present this formula as the following mathematical equation: **2[4(5)] + 4.**[25]

1. The song is divided into two, twenty-line stanzas. This represents the **2** in the equation.
2. All stanzas consist of five sets of four lines, each separated by a reiteration of "Quand on n'a que l'amour"—hence, the **[4(5)].** The rhyme scheme is symmetrical between each group of four, but not in the traditional sense. It is arranged as ABBA throughout the entirety of the first forty lines and is reflected in Brel's musical setting. Mathematically, it is written with square brackets and parentheses to separate the two multiplications. What happens inside the square brackets occurs twice (hence the 2).
3. Finally, the **+ 4** reflects the final four lines, separated from the 40 previous ones. Here, the rhyme scheme changes to ABAB. It also marks a dynamic highpoint, signaling a culmination of the love between two people, a dynamic passion.

Quand on n'a que l'amour
À s'offrir en partage
Au jour du grand voyage
Qu'est notre grand amour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Mon amour, toi et moi
Pour qu'éclatent de joie
Chaque heure et chaque jour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour vivre nos promesses
Sans nulle autre richesse
Que d'y croire toujours
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour meubler de merveilles
Et couvrir de soleil
La laideur des faubourgs
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour unique raison
Pour unique chanson
Et unique secours

Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour habiller matin
Pauvres et malandrins
De manteaux de velours
Quand on n'a que l'amour
À offrir en prière
Pour les maux de la terre
En simple troubadour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
À offrir à ceux-là
Dont l'unique combat
Est de chercher le jour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour tracer un chemin
Et forcer le destin
À chaque carrefour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour parler aux canons
Et rien qu'une chanson
Pour convaincre un tambour

Alors, sans avoir rien
Que la force d'aimer
Nous aurons dans nos mains
Ami, le monde entier.

Figure 1: Lyrics to Brel's *Quand on n'a que l'amour* with color coordinations to reflect rhyme scheme.

The presentation of Brel's *Quand on n'a que l'amour* aims to demonstrate how the text is formulated, reflecting the above-numbered list. The red lettering indicates the symmetrical rhyme throughout the song, with each of the quatrains ending with the same phonetic and orthographic "our" sound.[26] By using this rhyming pattern, Brel makes it clear that the referential meaning of "amour" (love) is tropologically enhanced by sound imagery (mostly metaphors) that rhymes with "amour:" "jour" (love everyday), "toujours" (love always), "faubourgs" (love

embellishes), “secours” (love rescues), “velours” (love is tender), “troubadour” (love serenades), “carrefour” (love is everywhere), and finally, “tambour” (love conquers war). The blue notation, meanwhile, represents the B rhyme, even though it is not matched phonetically between each stanza. Indeed, with one exception—“raison” (reason), “chanson” (song), “canons” (canons)—each of these two-line idioms inside the stanzas is a different rhyme throughout. I did not change the color of the text in order to reflect the symmetrical rhyme form throughout the poem. Finally, as indicated in the text, each repetition of the title is marked in bold as a form of landmark. This self-enclosed line (“Quand on n’a que l’amour”) serves the dual purpose of acting as a mini-refrain as well as separating each 20-line stanza into five independently rhyming quatrains. The dramatic progression of the song is structurally patterned upon this line, which is repeated ten times with each repetition evoking a deeper level of emotionalism. As a result, the poetic text becomes a succession of arguments, made more convincing by rhetorical gestures (enjambments, caesuras), and concluding with a stanza that sums up the argument: love conquers all. Hence, the **[4(5)]** designation.

Figure 1 above reproduces the general outline of the poetic text for *Quand on n’a que l’amour*, with the rhyme scheme labeled. The goal is to indicate the symmetry between each line (rhyming lines usually align with one another) and to show how the poetry influenced the musical setting, most notably, the prominent six opening tones of the vocal line (C-D-E-D-E-C). The melodic line and the poetic text of “Quand on n’a que l’amour” become so intertwined that the listener begins to hear the words even when presented with these six tones only. The notes become part of the story, and the text becomes musical. This interactivity of poetic music and musical discourse can be best viewed through Hatten’s theory of virtual agency and virtual subjectivity. Virtual pertains to “any actant or human agent (or actor or subjectivity) that can be

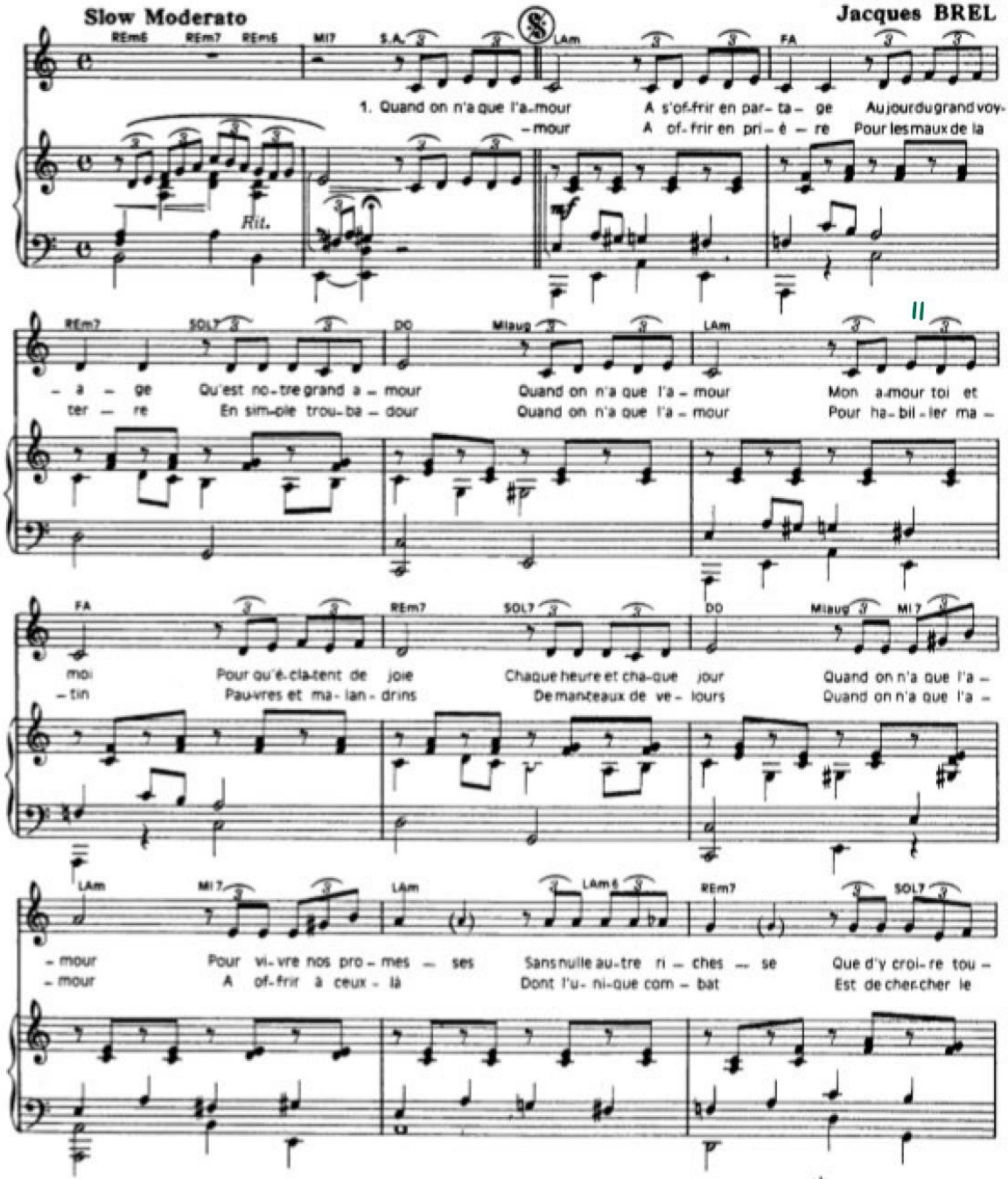
inferred as producing intentional musical actions," thus forming a "reacti[on] to implied forces or other agents, revealing intentions, and experiencing thoughts and emotions."[27] The dynamic interaction between music and poetry allows listeners to hear the music in the text and the text in the music.

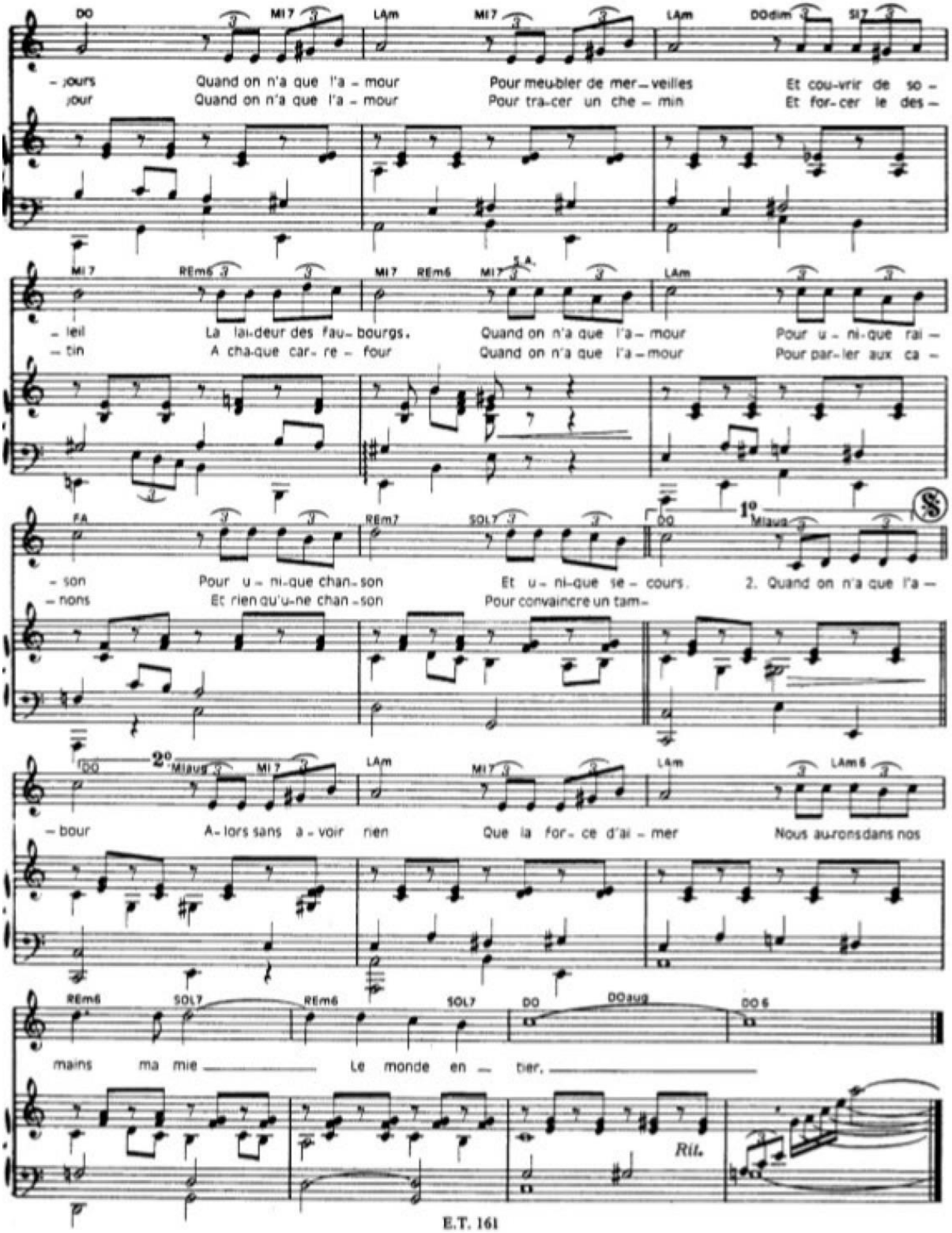
The full score provided below for *Quand on n'a que l'amour* presents a Piano/Vocal outline.[28] The first note of any phrase, no matter which genre or dynamic environment, will inevitably feel as though it is slightly accented, due to the listener not having anything to compare it to. This provides a mixed interpretation of the opening line. There is a small, technically "fake" accent that occurs on "Quand," simply due to the placement of the note. More than this, the entire line of text appears to serve as an anacrusis first leading into "que l'amour" (the music being separated into two triplet figures), then providing a linguistic accent on the last syllable of the phrase, "mour." Sonically, this slight accentual weight reinforces the narrative's expressive motivation: love is all we need, really.

With *Quand on n'a que l'amour*, Brel is altering the supposed relationship between music and text. Musically, the analyst would probably interpret the written triplet figures as two sets of anapestic dimeter (weak-weak-strong // weak-weak-strong) figures, with the strong synopsis in the second figure receiving a slightly bigger accent. On the other hand, when we examine the text poetically, the syllabic language eliminates any real accents before, and arguably on, "mour." Brel reflects this with an agogic accent on the final syllable (half-note after both triplet figures). The symmetrical build adds a layer of semantic interpretation, notably mirroring the near identical syllabic count in each line. It becomes a kind of melodic recitative within the poetic framework, its purpose being to "hypnotize" the audience with the expressive message that love is glorious, victorious, and all-encompassing.

QUAND ON N'A QUE L'AMOUR

Paroles et Musique de
Jacques BREL




DO MI7 LAm MI7 LAm DOdim SI7
– jours Quand on n'a que l'a – mour Pour meubler de mer – veilles Et cou-vrir de so –
jour Quand on n'a que l'a – mour Pour tra-cer un che – min Et for-cer le des –
MI7 REm6 MI7 REm6 MI7 LAm
– leil La lai-deur des fau – bourgs. Quand on n'a que l'a – mour Pour u – ni-que rai –
– tin A cha-que car – re – four Quand on n'a que l'a – mour Pour par-ler aux ca –
FA REm7 SOL7 DO 1° Mlaus
– son Pour u – ni-que chan-son Et u – ni-que se – cours. 2. Quand on n'a que l'a –
– nons Et rien qu'u-ne chan-son Pour convaincre un tam-
DO 2° Mlaus MI7 LAm MI7 LAm LAm6
– bour A-lors sans a-voir rien Que la for – ce d'ai – mer Nous aurons dans nos
REm6 SOL7 REm6 SOL7 DO DOaug DO 6
mains ma mie Le monde en – tier.
Rit.

E.T. 161

Not only does Brel create another triple-time division, he also introduces two additional elements in his melodic line:

a. The symmetry allows the listener to continue to "hear" Brel's narrative, even when he's not singing.[29] As a result, the musical agent (the combination of both lyrics and musical setting) remains constant, thus enabling the listener to anticipate the poetic text, adding an element of surprise when there is an unexpected twist (love conquers depression).
b. The melodic line (curve of melody, perhaps not duration of tones) corresponds exactly to how one would naturally enunciate the text (curve of intonation), though perhaps a bit exaggerated, with the pitch indents being slightly larger than in the spoken word but still following the same path. As a result, intensity and authenticity are added to the symbiotic text/music relationship, which provides an even deeper meaning to the concept of love.

You may have noticed that when the French communicate in their native tongue it sounds rather romantic and innately musical—they create melodic and dynamic curves unconsciously. This is partly due to the fact that in French there are no accents within the words. Thomas Grubb observes that the French language "sings, floats, groans, purrs, and titillates the ear with its clear, clean consonants [coupled with] its pure, highly resonated frontal vowel sounds."[30] Emphases are present but they are always at the end of the poetic line, given that French is a syllable-based language.[31] More than that, the French language has a very particular level of dynamism and pitch change, especially with vowels. These are done unintentionally by French speakers but do make the language quite unique. Especially notable is the treatment of the letter A, with the deep sound "ah." In Brel's song title "Quand on n'a que l'amour," we find this low vowel tone twice,

noted in bold: after "n**'a,**" and at "**l'a**mour." If you ask a native French speaker to simply say this line in an everyday conversation, you will notice a very slight elevation in pitch upon the "ah" assonance. Subtle as it may be, the pitch moves up and will likely be accompanied by a very slight accent.[32] Brel replicates this via a simple scalar motion from C to E, then back down to C, on "mour," as the spoken word would proceed as well. Rhythmically, the language is also replicated with the first five short syllables represented by equal triplet eighth-note figures, as well as with Brel's gentle guitar strokes.[33] Iconically, the timbral quality of the low "ah" sound adds an element of drama and grandeur to the song.

Musical Agents and Narrativity

The concepts of narrative trajectory and musical agent presented throughout this report are based upon the work of Byron Almén[34] and Robert Hatten. When Almén applies the concept of narrativity to the musical line he explains that "we impose a rhetorical pattern on reality when we structure our arguments" with the intention of "selecting certain facts instead of others," "certain positions instead of others."[35] This idea of formulating an almost hierarchical "human" or even "virtual" aesthetic to music underlies Hatten's theories of virtual agency.

The term of interest in this case is "virtual." Obviously, I am not referencing virtual content as in a video game, but a philosophical interpretation or even re-interpretation of text or music. We can begin to see "a virtual human agent in music [a]s cognitively constructed, and that construction is often based on the listener's attribution of expressed emotion."[36] Furthermore, "[e]mbodied actants (potentially willful exertions against a virtual environment of musical forces) afford the emergence of virtual agents, but virtual agents also draw more deeply on conventions of a musical style to acquire the expressive forces they appear to embody."[37]

Ultimately, the formulation of such agents allows us to re-define a multitude of agential properties including (but not limited to):

1. Performative
2. Narrative
3. Dynamic
4. Linguistic
5. Composer and Audience

Additionally, with these concepts on the table, Hatten's theories allow the presentation of "gestures," formulating a unique understanding/interpretation of the musical line or curve. In the realm of Music Theory, Hatten defines the gestural as "communicative, expressive, energetic shaping through time regardless of medium or sensory-motor source."[38] Moreover, as is expected with music, there is a connection between gesture and movements with relation to time. Consequently, a gestural set of data points can be constructed based on "acceleration, deceleration, intensification, and relaxation."[39]

For the purpose of this report, I present gestural agents as a form of narrative understanding. In light of Hatten's theorized methodology, these agents combine both "affect (emotion)" and "significance (meaning)," to create the overall "emergent expressive meaning" of human agents and their gestural counterparts as assessed through the use of "harmony, melody, motive, meter, and other relevant stylistic elements" in music.[40] Combining Hatten's gestural theories and Almén's rhetorical patterning opens the door to explaining the narrative properties hidden within the musical discourse and the poetic text. I will be referring to these properties as "gestures" and "agents" throughout my report, with the understanding that these terms reference Hatten's and Almén's theorized fundamentals.

Unraveling Ravel

There is considerable evidence of Brel's deep appreciation for classical music, especially the compositions of Maurice Ravel. Brel himself affirms:

> J'aime la musique. Tout d'abord […] je vous avouerais que j'aime passionnément Ravel ![41]

> I love music. First and foremost, […] I will admit to you that I love Ravel passionately! (My translation)

When listening to Brel's chansons it is not uncommon to find a melodic or harmonic allusion to a famous classical work. In *Les Désespérés* (The Desperate Ones), the musical reference is even more overt since the lyrics are set to a near-exact version of the theme from the second movement of Ravel's Concerto in G (1931). This chanson, therefore, is an example of Brel setting music to text, instead of text set to music. My analysis of this chanson focuses on how Brel re-invents Ravel's music so that it dictates the lyrics. Specifically, I will examine how much attention Brel pays to the French language's natural melodic "line," knowing that the line is pre-composed, so to speak.

Before addressing *Les Désespérés*, however, I would like to briefly discuss the second movement of Ravel's concerto, particularly the opening 34 measures. Even though presented in a jazz environment, the movement's melodic line sings in a neoclassical fashion. As such, a particularly meticulous algorithm is used by Ravel in combining both Gershwin-inspired jazz elements and Schubert-inspired classical elements.

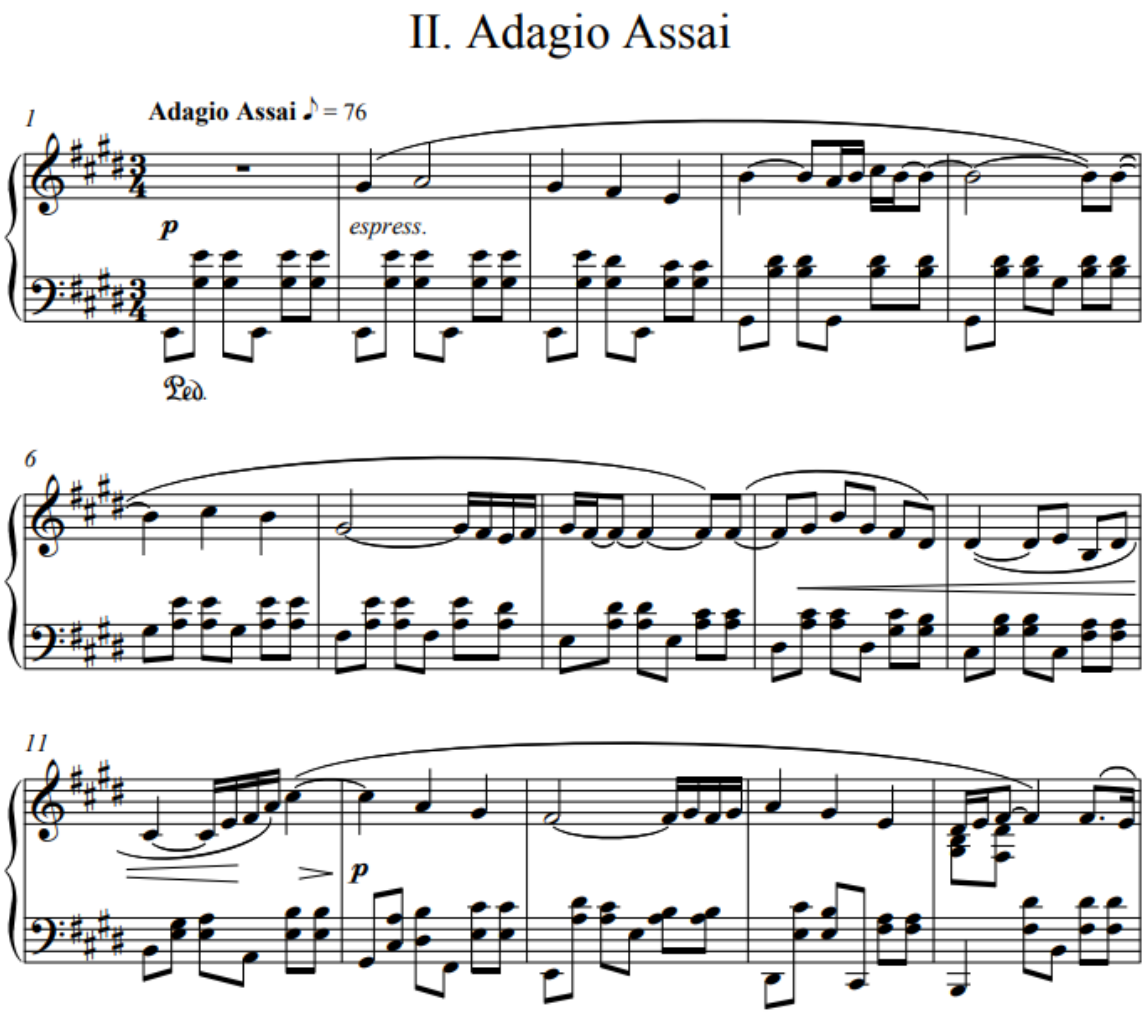


Figure 2: Opening 15 measures of the second movement of Ravel's Concerto in G. I do not include all 34 measures as this segment gives the needed structure of the second movement.

Although Ravel's Concerto in G is, in fact, very jazzy in nature, this description applies mostly to the first and third movements. The second movement, especially the opening, incorporates more classical elements. In contrast to the first movement, which concludes with a heavily dissonant, inflected, arpeggiated motif and a brusque, chromatic ending (arguably not sounding like an ending at all), the second movement opens with solo piano. As is typical of

classical concertos, the second movement features a dramatically slower tempo, as well as a drastic reduction in texture and timbre. With nearly no break between movements, we move from a *fortissimo, attacca,* full orchestra at the end of the first movement, to a *piano*, single-instrument, almost funeral march timbre at the start of this second movement. Much more Debussy or Satie-like in style (think of the footsteps in Debussy's *Des pas sur la neige* or Satie's *Gymnopédies*), this second movement was described by Ravel himself as "That flowing phrase! How I worked over it bar by bar! It nearly killed me!"[42]

The slow-walk theme in the second movement of Ravel's concerto is written in a ¾ time signature, with each measure separated into two groups of three eight-note footsteps. This hints at a compound 6/8 time signature, although it does not really impact the way we hear the piece. It is the only real change in Brel's re-statement of the Ravel concerto: Brel writes out the same harmonies, the same inversions, the same rhythms (proportionately), but turns Ravel's eighth notes into quarter notes. Consequently, given the change in tempo between Ravel's theme and Brel's chanson, the aural difference is minimal. Ravel provides us with a metronome marking of 76 bpm to the eighth note, while Brel's recording is around 63 bpm to the quarter note. Brel's changes create a clear intertextual connection to the Ravel movement while still fulfilling Brel's poetic intentions. In *Les Désespérés,* the slight augmentation of the rhythm tropologically enhances the desperate folks' silent march to the bridge where they will drown, and serves the purpose of down-beat displacement, allowing the composer to line up the music with the text's emphases.

Brel's daughter, France, explains in a book published by the Brel Foundation in Brussels that her father was always listening to music:

> Lors de ses journées d'écriture, entre sonorités à trouver, synonymes, ratures, corrections, accords de guitare, silences, mouvements et tensions avant l'arrivée du vers à transcrire, le pêcheur de mots se laisse aussi volontiers porter et inspirer par les sonates, quintettes, quatuors et Lieder de Franz Schubert.[43]
>
> During his days of writing, between searching for sonorities, synonyms, erasures, corrections, guitar chords, rests, movements and tensions before the writing of a poetic line, the man who fishes for words also gladly allows himself to be transported and inspired by the sonatas, quintets, quartets, and Lieder of Franz Schubert. (My translation)

France Brel explains that *Les Désespérés* was, in fact, "highly inspired" by the Ravel concerto:

> La musique classique fait partie du quotidien de Jacques. Il écrit ce texte sur une musique très inspirée par le deuxième mouvement du concerto en sol majeur de son compositeur préféré, Maurice Ravel.[44]
>
> Classical music is part of Jacques' everyday life. He writes this text based on a musical line highly inspired by the second movement of the Concerto in G Major by his favorite composer, Maurice Ravel. (My translation)

Brel's entire musical setting, no doubt, is a direct citation of Ravel's composition. However, was the text set to the music, or did Brel realize, after writing the lyrics, that they fit the music beautifully? Given Brel's love and admiration for Ravel, either one is plausible. The latter would require a more vivid memory, of course, but that alone is not enough of a counter-argument.

Figure 3 reproduces the poem as written in France Brel's book. It is color-coded to reveal the lay-out of the rhyming scheme—an element less systematic in this chanson than in other songs by Brel. The poetic equation in *Les Désespérés* is presented as **4(3+1) + 4**, but the rhyme scheme is symmetrical in an unconventional manner.[45] As opposed to the fully consistent and predictable ABBA rhyme scheme in *Quand on n'a que l'amour*, *Les Désespérés* does not rely on a single rhyme scheme to constrain itself. Instead, Brel varies the poetic form when altering the

narrative point of view. The AABB stanzas (1, 2, and 4) share the same pattern; they also oppose darker nasal vowels (lines 1-2) against lighter "é" vowels, as marked by the blue color in lines 3-4. The middle stanza (3) highlights the same lighter vowel at the end of every line.

Se tiennent par la main et marchent en silence	A
Dans ces villes éteintes que le crachin balance	A
Ne sonnent que leurs pas, pas à pas fredonnés	B
Ils marchent en silence, les désespérés	B
Ils ont brûlé leurs ailes, ils ont perdu leurs branches	A
Tellement naufragés que la mort paraît blanche	A
Ils reviennent d'amour, ils se sont réveillés	B
Ils marchent en silence, les désespérés	B
Et je sais leur chemin pour l'avoir cheminé	B
Déjà plus de cent fois, cent fois plus qu'à moitié	B
Moins vieux ou plus meurtris, ils vont le terminer	B
Ils marchent en silence, les désespérés	B
Et en dessous le pont, l'eau est douce et profonde	A
Voici la bonne hôtesse, voici la fin du monde	A
Ils pleurent leurs prénoms, comme de jeunes mariés	B
Et fondent en silence, les désespérés	B
Que se lève celui qui leur lance la pierre	A
Il ne sait de l'amour que le verbe s'aimer	B
Sur le pont n'est plus rien qu'une brume légère	A
Ça s'oublie en silence, ceux qui ont espéré	B

Figure 3: Poetic text for *Les Désespérés* with color-coded rhyme scheme.

Even though *Les Désespérés* is written as a succession of Alexandrines, [46] one should note the expressive effect of the refrain portion of the fourth line in each of the first four stanzas—the title of the poem—which only contains five (not the expected six) syllables. Brel restores (closes) the Alexandrine with the six-syllable variant ending the last stanza. Throughout *Les Désespérés*, he projects a clear emphasis and separation after the sixth syllable of each line. He designates each of these caesuras with a comma. As with most poetry, however, the

Alexandrine's characteristic emphasis on the sixth syllable is variable in its strength. The musical setting, meanwhile, reflects this symmetry. Looking at the first two vocalized measures, we can see that the first set of six syllables ends on the downbeat of the second measure on "main" (hand). Although a poetic downbeat, the replacement of the previous measure's rest gives the impression of a weaker enunciation—a reverse accent, if you will. As such, the end of the sentence introduces the following six syllables. The rest in this case is replaced by a repeated eighth note, allowing an extra syllable without changing the rhythm. Brel intentionally lowers the volume to anticipate the silent march of the desperate folks ("marchent en silence"). The desperate hold hands ("se tiennent par la main") and this literal meaning of the hand is tropologically enhanced by what the softer dynamics and the hand symbolize: solidarity.

The expressive meaning of the poetic text takes a dramatic turn when, in the third stanza, the chanson unexpectedly transitions from the desperate folks to the narrator himself, as reflected by the author's change to a more emphatic rhyme scheme (BBBB). Brel makes use of several poetic/rhetorical effects (caesura, adnomination, enjambment, chiasmus) to expose his close connection to the desperate, implying that he, too, has "walked the path" that leads to suicide:

> Et je sais leur chemin pour l'avoir cheminé
> Déjà plus de cent fois, cent fois plus qu'à moitié
>
> And I know their walk, for I have walked it myself
> Already a hundred times, a hundred times further than halfway
> (My translation)

Presented over the same music as the first stanza, these lines give the impression that the narrator is walking down the same musical path as his characters. The tone of the singer does not change either, equating himself to the desperate ones. Additionally, the above-mentioned Alexandrines demonstrate Brel's double-layered use of repetition: first through the embeddedness of the noun

"chemin" in the past participle "cheminé" (an example of adnomination), and secondly through the exact repetition of the musical material. Clearly, the poetic text exemplifies the original musical structure and adds a level of personal commentary to the song.

In the fourth stanza, Brel describes how "beneath the bridge, the water is soft and deep" and how the river becomes the final resting place for the desperate. Once gone, all that is left of the desperate folks is "light fog." Echoing the impressionistic attributes of Ravel's concerto, the "light fog" imagery both corresponds to and opposes the music. The timbre of Ravel's concerto that Brel reiterates is extremely "floaty" in nature, giving the audience the impression of light dancing, or heavenly comfort. In contrast, the footstep-like pattern paired with the text's dark subject matter pulls the listener back to the narrator's storytelling, thus "cancelling out" the "bliss."

In the first line of the closural quatrain, Brel summarizes his representation of the desperate ones and includes an intertextual reference to the Bible:

> Que se lève celui qui leur lance la pierre
>
> May he rise, he who throws at them a stone (My transliteration)

Here, the narrator harshly condemns anyone who judges people who take their own life, adding that those who judge have never truly loved, a claim Brel recreates musically.[47] In measures 21-23, Brel suddenly alters the dominant tone chromatically to create a G-sharp major sonority. While written in the score as "*sol #*," it is behaving in a fashion similar to the flat-six (^{b}VI) of C Major.[48] A borrowed chord, the G-sharp Major with its B-sharp in the outer voices allows the harmonic function to flow rather purposefully, while introducing an alteration between Major

and minor.[49] Once more, the melodic line above this harmonic change goes down a full octave within the course of five measures, aligning with the metaphorical "melting" of the desperate folks.[50] First, the desperate folks march in silence; then, they die in silence.

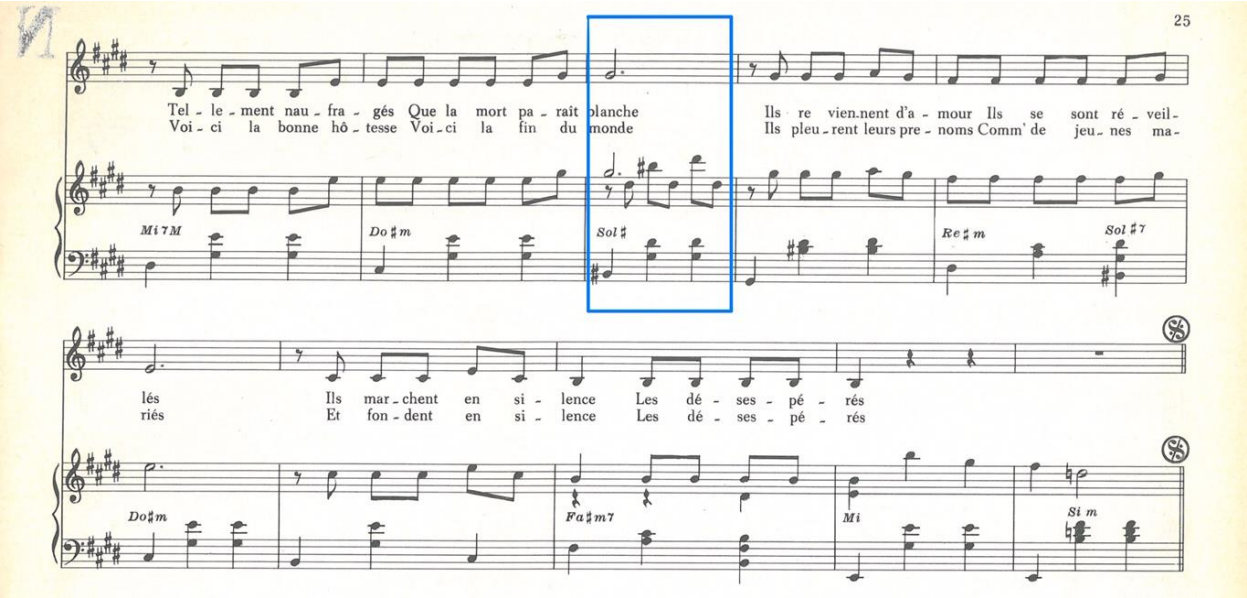


Figure 4 Presentation of the G-Sharp Major sonority—*measures 19-28.*
Reproduced with permission from *Fondation Jacques Brel, Fondation d'utilité publique.*

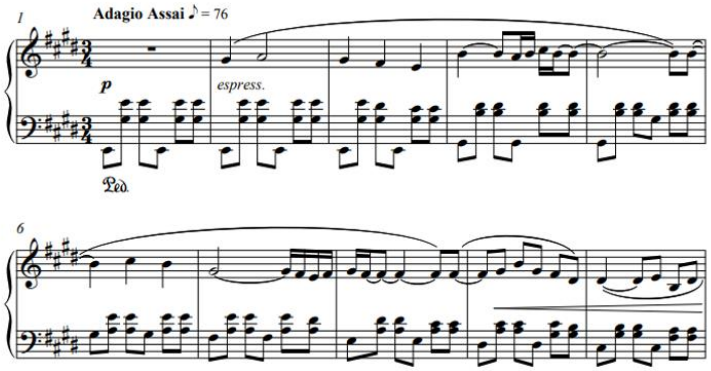
In the end, however, the contrast resolves itself through a rhetorical turn. In death, Brel uses the perfect rhyme *désespérés*/*espéré* (the desperate become those who have hoped), with the music's coda mirroring the poetic volta, but only in the piano part. Whereas the other stanzas end with a downward motion in the piano right hand, this last iteration features a nearly 2-octave ascent to the high tonic of E, as though the piano itself (or the soul of the desperate ones) were rising to the heavens. Brel and his arrangers wrote the last coda as an ending—it is not a direct quotation of Ravel's concerto, although still characteristically inspired by the classical movement.

It is fitting for Brel to conclude *Les Désespérés* with "espéré," a word sonically and figuratively embedded within "désespérés." Despair and hope, Brel tells us, are inherently intertwined. A gestural effect is created when the title words "Les Désespérés" are repeated at the end of every quatrain, each time right after a small caesura (comma). More than this, there is a melodically-infused *rubato* associated with the four-syllable noun. The result is a progressive slowing down of the word, adding an extra layer of musical text-painting to the folks themselves—this rubato gesturally represents the slowing down of the desperate folks' funeral march followed by the slow descent into the river. In both cases, the rubato on and leading up to the word "désespérés" followed by the immediate *a tempo* directly corresponds to the dramatic progression of the narrative line.

It is curious to note that both Ravel and Brel clearly separate melody and accompaniment throughout their respective works. Figure 5 shows the opening phrases from both the Ravel concerto movement and Brel's re-adaptation. The melody from the concerto is presented in Brel's piano right hand, albeit with a few tones deleted. In the words of Richard Henry Jeric, Brel echoes Ravel in that "[w]henever the piano plays the themes in the [second] movement, all of the accompaniment is in the left hand."[51] The obvious difference with Brel's work is his addition of a second melodic line, more specifically the addition of a new, more prominent melodic line. The separation still stands, with the piano creating a polyphonic incision, but, starting at measure 16, the right hand doubles the vocal line. Although this doubling does not contradict Jeric's statement, it does temporarily remove the prominent polyphonic character, a feature that returns in every other stanza and in the coda. The result is a rhythmically-augmented polyphonic funeral procession which reinforces musically the overall expressive tone of the poetic discourse.

This second form of re-purposing begs the question of finding Brel's source for the second melodic line.[52] Although recognizable as simply an arpeggiated tonic chord in second inversion, the eagle-eyed viewer will have spotted that it is also Ravel's original melody played backwards (again, with a few missing notes), as illustrated in Figure 6. In this way, Brel does not change any of the original harmonies, allowing the music to flow seamlessly with the original context.

Ravel:



Brel:

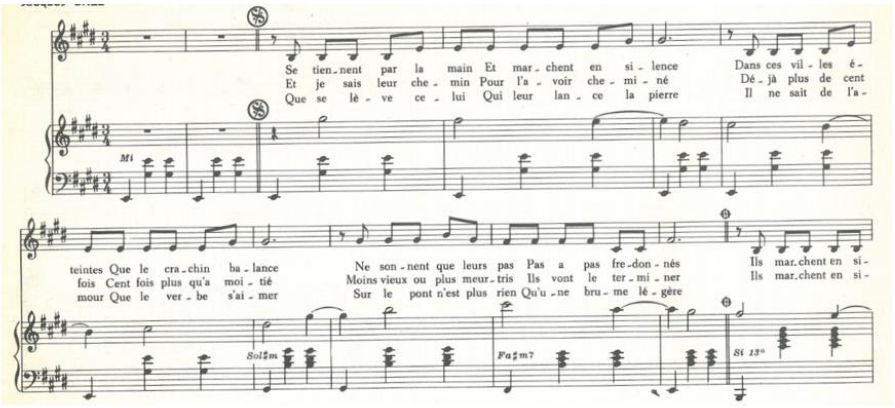


Figure 5: Opening phrases of both the Ravel Concerto solo piano and Brel's *Les Désespérés.*
Reproduced with permission from *Fondation Jacques Brel, Fondation d'utilité publique.*

As shown in the *Quand on n'a que l'amour* analysis, Brel pays remarkably close attention to the French language when setting it to music. Consequently, the music—especially the melody—reflects the natural trajectory of the language: the musical/compositional agent is dependent upon the linguistic agent.[53] In *Les Désespérés,* on the other hand, the linguistic agent has to conform to the musical agent. Therefore, the vocal melodic line is closer to a *récitatif* than a chanson, with tones repeated as often as five times in a single phrase.[54] The Ravel melody is superimposed, which allows the repeated tones to still sing. The two melodic lines complement each other as one coherent whole, with the linguistic agent having to follow the music's gestural shapes.

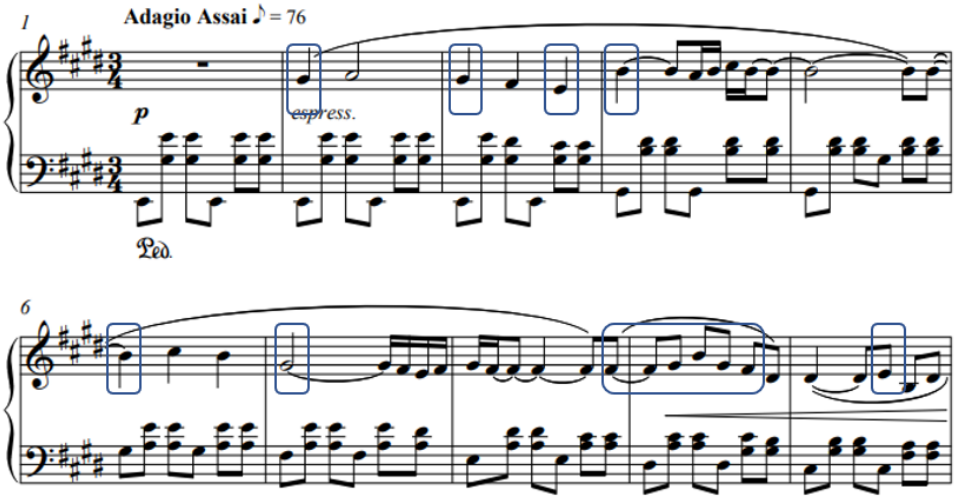


Figure 6: Opening 10 measures from the second movement of Ravel's Concerto in G. Boxes indicate the melodic tones Brel re-takes in his interpretation, and then reverses to create a polyphonic relationship. Compare this to the melodic line found in Brel's score in Figure 5.

This form of inversion leads me to believe that the text of *Les Désespérés* fits the music too perfectly and that the new melody is far too derivative and seamlessly polyphonic for the lyrics and music to have been thought of independently by Brel. However, the simplicity of the mostly triadic melody is perhaps not enough to form a definitive answer. In terms of my interpretation of this chanson and my personal experience with musical composition, I lean towards Brel using the Ravel concerto as the basis for *Les Désespérés*, with the poetic text being written to fit the existing melody. It is, of course, very possible for music to be stuck in one's mind like an earworm, but that would still imply that Brel was thinking about the Ravel concerto. It is difficult to find conclusive evidence that this correlation occurred unconsciously, but it is not implausible. It does provide an intriguing topic for further discussion, one that still perplexes many scholars and even Brel's family members. At any rate, the "depressed" character of Brel's poetic discourse adds a darker, expressive quality to the chanson, a quality not present in Ravel's original concerto movement.

It is also worth noting that there is no record of Brel performing *Les Désespérés* in concert. The only recording that we have is in a studio setting. Perhaps the components that were a central part of Ravel's work gave Brel the impression that something was missing in the text/music interaction of *Les Désespérés*. We will never know for sure, but this unresolved enigma does provide grounds for a stimulating discussion.[55]

Unleashed Anger and Aristocratic Dismay

Like many French chansonniers, Brel is especially vocal when it comes to expressing his disapproval of society. Specifically, his songs criticize the upper-aristocracy and the bourgeoisie:

> On dit toujours que je suis fils de bourgeois […] [et] que mon père était bourgeois : je n'aurais jamais su si je n'avais pas fait de chansons.[56]
>
> People always say that I am the son of a bourgeois […] [and] that my father was bourgeois: I would never have known had I not written songs. (My translation)

Songwriting allows Brel to see society with more clarity while also providing him with an outlet to express his opinions fearlessly. On several occasions, particularly near the end of his career, Brel wrote texts knowing full well that people would strongly disapprove. By far the most powerful example, one that I almost label NSFW (Not Safe For Work), is his letter-song *Les F…* (The F…). Written and recorded only a few months before his death in 1978, the song literally signs off by stating that all Flemish nationalists—those "Flamingants" who want to turn Belgium into fascist Flanders—are despicable.[57] Even before the music begins Brel sarcastically yells "Les Flamingants ! Chanson comique !" ("The Flemish Nationalists! A comedic song!"). Paired with amusing electronic—almost disco-like—instrumentation, the song expresses a powerful mockery of Flemish extremists. The French term "Flamingant," it should be noted, is derogatory and politically incorrect, which is the reason why Brel does not spell it out in the title, but that does not stop him from shouting it out in the song.

When diagnosed with lung cancer in 1974, Brel decided to fulfill a childhood dream and travel the world by means of both a boat and a small airplane. While this dream was not fully realized, he travelled to many distant places, including South America. Although undocumented, this is likely how Brel came about the music for *Les F…*, which is a direct re-interpretation of

Brazilian Jazz musician João Donato's *The Frog*. However, the credits make it clear that the text was set to Donato's music purposefully, rather than the possibility of an earworm as in the Ravel. This is demonstrated through the extremely static melody (almost the entire song is built of half steps), with the background music "noodling" around the vocal line.

Les F… provides a unique example of tone-painting in that the cheerful, Brazilian jazz melody directly contradicts the dark, political message of the poetic text. This strong contradiction between poetic text and musical discourse has the expressive effect of deep sarcasm and extreme contempt. The light, happy music—reminiscent of a situation comedy ("chanson comique !" Brel shouts)—tropologically enhances the grave tone of the narrative as the music adds its own level of commentary. *Les F…* presents various illustrations of sonic exemplification which can be best understood by interpreting the poetic text:

Les Flamingants, chanson comique!

Messieurs les Flamingants, j'ai deux mots à vous rire
Il y a trop longtemps que vous me faites frire
À vous souffler dans l'cul pour devenir autobus
Vous voilà acrobates, mais vraiment rien de plus
Nazis durant les guerres et catholiques entre elles
Vous oscillez sans cesse du fusil au missel
Vos regards sont lointains, votre humour est exsangue
Bien qu'y ait des rues à Gand qui pissent dans les deux langues
Tu vois, quand j'pense à vous, j'aime que rien ne se perde
Messieurs les Flamingants, je vous emmerde

Vous salissez la Flandre, mais la Flandre vous juge
Voyez la mer du Nord, elle s'est enfuie de Bruges
Cessez de me gonfler mes vieilles roubignoles
Avec votre art flamand-italo-espagnol.
Vous êtes tellement, tellement beaucoup trop lourds
Que quand, les soirs d'orage, des chinois cultivés
Me demandent d'où je suis, je réponds fatigué
Et les larmes aux dents, "Ik ben van Luxembourg".
Et si aux jeunes femmes, on ose un chant flamand,
Elle s'envolent en rêvant aux oiseaux roses et blancs

Et je vous interdis d'espérer que jamais
À Londres, sous la pluie, on puisse vous croire anglais
Et je vous interdis, à New-York ou Milan
D'éructer Mes Seigneurs, autrement qu'en flamand
Vous n'aurez pas l'air cons, vraiment pas cons du tout
Et moi je m'interdis de dire que je m'en fous
Et je vous interdis, d'obliger nos enfants
Qui ne vous ont rien fait, à aboyer flamand
Et si mes frères se taisent, Eh bien tant pis pour elles
Je chante, persiste et signe, Je m'appelle Jacques BREL !

Figure 7: Poetic text from *Les F...*, with color-coded rhyme scheme.

a. Very indelicate, scatological humor: “cul” (ass), “pissent” (piss), “emmerde” (make shitty), “cons” (“douchebags”)

   i. While Brel is often intensely critical of society and people, he does not take strong language lightly. In the case of *Les F…*, the colorful words are musically inflected within the humorous Brazilian soundtrack. The most significant illustrations occur on “emmerde” at the very end of the first stanza, a word which sonically separates itself from the rest of the recitative-like stanza. At the closure of the first nine lines, Brel simply provides a resolution to the sentence; it does not sound markedly different but rather “settles down” as the entire stanza is built only of half-step progressions. Except for an A-sharp at the end of the fifth line, Brel spends most of the first stanza alternating between a G and G-sharp. When he arrives at “emmerde,” however, he goes for a full whole tone step, skipping the G-sharp and landing right on the A-natural, paired suddenly with a Major sonority. Simultaneously, he elongates the word slightly on the second syllable, giving it an extra level of ridicule. The hybrid mixing of comedic music and dramatic dialogue is extended in the sentences “Messieurs les Flamingants, je vous emmerde” which juxtapose formal address and inappropriate language (“Flemish gentlemen, I will make your life shitty”). Brel dialogically combines two contrasting modes of discourse (polite/impolite— “Tu vois, quand j’pense à vous”) and the expressive effect is biting mockery. He insults *Les F…* in style.

   ii. Though not unique to this chanson, Brel also dialogically mixes in a sentence in Dutch, near the end of the second stanza: “Ik ben van Luxembourg” (“I am from Luxembourg”)—we remember, of course, Brel failing his Dutch language classes

in High School. Here, the Dutch sentence is the narrator's reply to an "educated Chinese" individual asking the question "Where are you from?" His answer, which he gives with shame and tears from his teeth ("les larmes aux dents"): Luxembourg (not Belgium).

b. Puns

i. A "flamand" is a Flemish person. A "flamant" (different spelling but same pronunciation) is a flamingo (pink bird). Brel says that when he sings a Flemish song to young women, they fly away and start dreaming about pink and white birds. This intentional pun on words figuratively enhances the referential meaning of "Flemish" by adding a layer of ridicule.[58]

ii. The deliberate word-pun on "flamand" occurs at the end of the second stanza, strategically located in the same point in time as "emmerde." As a result, the musical emphasis is equivalent, apart from a level of displacement. The word "flamand" is placed on the last G-sharp (end of the second line), with the A-natural falling on the word "blanc" used to describe the birds. The slight elongation is transferred here as well, which increases the ridiculousness of the description—Brel is aligning the birds with shit!

iii. Finally, the pun extends itself to the music even further in terms of style. As it turns out, the musical style used by Brazilian composer João Donato echoes Flamenco dance music. The rhythmic *compás*, unusual tonality, and vibrant dance initiatives of the Flamenco are all present in Donato's *The Frog*. Additionally, "Flamenco" refers, according to the Dictionary of English Etymology, to the Flemish population and their traditions. In short, Brel utilizes the word in three

different ways: “flamand,” “flamant,” and “flamenco”—a person, a bird, and a dance. The song itself presents three layers of criticism and emotional baggage—two of which the listener likely does not realize the first time through. As a result, Brel’s *Les F…* thrives in its ability to re-define a chanson’s *Gestalt.*

c. Neologism (“art flamand-italo-espagnol”)
    i. This neologism semantically undermines the authenticity of much revered Flemish art. To Brel, Flemish art is a hybrid mixing of Flemish, Italian, and Spanish styles and therefore it is fake.
    ii. As many of Brel’s chansons, *Les F…* is strophic in that the music is identical for each of the stanzas. Intentionally humoristic, this music translates to the “fake” nature of Brel’s neologism. The melodic line is very real, but he does not change it for this sentence. The half-step build-up remains unaltered, albeit with a slight emphasis on “italo-espagnol” in Brel’s voice. Instead of singing the three adjectives as one compound word, “flamand-italo-espagnol” includes a slight gestural break after “flamand.” This is not a coincidence, despite it being done for syllabic accentuation. It is saying “Flemish art, that’s what you think,” but in reality, “Italian and Spanish!”
d. More rhetorical gestures—repetition and caesura (“tellement, tellement” / “pas l’air cons, vraiment pas cons du tout” / “Et je vous interdis”)
    i. When Brel writes “vous êtes tellement, tellement beaucoup trop lourds” (“You are so, so far too heavy”), repetition and caesura add a deep layer of ridicule to the adverb “tellement” (trisyllabic in this chanson). Musically, Brel accentuates each “tellement” quite pointedly, adding a much longer break in between than we

would expect given the pace of the vocal line. He also raises the entire melodic line one more half-step. This replicates the vocal line presented in the opening stanza (identical musical discourse).

ii. The same applies to the four-time repetition of "interdis" (forbid) in the concluding stanza. Each reiteration adds dramatic weight to the verb: I "*forbid*" you to think you may be British, I "*forbid*" you to belch in a language other than Flemish, I "*forbid*" myself to pretend I don't care, I "*forbid*" you to force our children to bark in Flemish (my emphasis). In the vocal line, although the notes themselves remain the same as in the previous two stanzas, the tone changes dramatically. Brel grows increasingly angry and even accentuates, quite aggressively, the final syllable of "interdis" (forbid). This accent, coupled with the same music as before and followed by the deeply offensive "aboyer" (bark), reinforces the artist's profound disgust. Much like a mathematical curve with one constant and one variable which suddenly rises, there is a sudden intensification in the chanson's poetic curve, with the curve then continuing on at the same rate of change from this new, upper data point, even if the equation (or music) levels out dynamically. As there is no diminishing of another variable to balance it out or return to the original dynamic level, the curve continues its previous trajectory with the increased bump included. Thus, the anger continues to increase for Brel and the dynamic curve keeps rising concurrently:

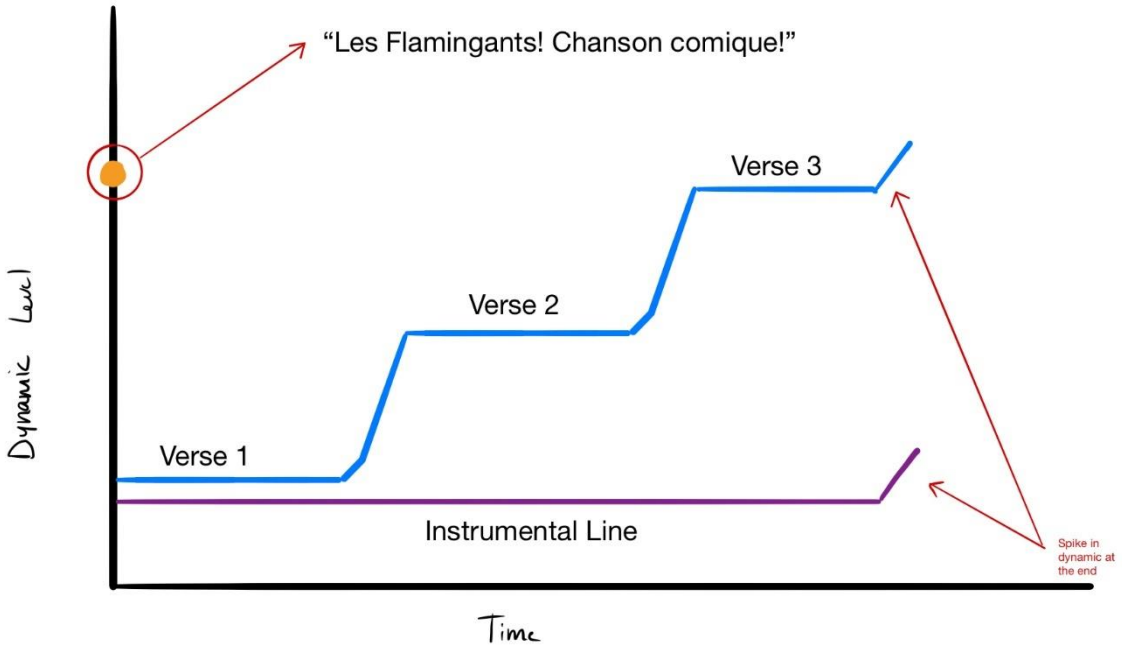


Figure 8 Dynamic curve for Brel's *Les F….* The length of each stanza is not drawn to scale, but it shows the depiction of the dynamics. I also omitted the instrumentation after "Chanson comique !" as it follows the instrumental line drawn here.

In each of these repetitions, the music seems to correlate perfectly with the text. As the music is a direct citation of Donato's work, it is difficult to say that the music was intentionally written for Brel's text, even though it certainly gives that impression. However, it is perfectly reasonable to hypothesize that, much like the Ravel example, Brel wrote the poetic text with Donato's music in mind. As a result, there is an element of mickey-mousing when it comes to putting the two together. The text is in perfect harmony with the musical discourse—the music repeating its notation as the text repeats its words, rhetorical delays and all.

In keeping with the epistolary genre, Brel closes his letter to the Flemish Nazi alliance with the following signature lines:

> Et si mes frères se taisent, Eh bien tant pis pour elles
> Je chante, persiste et signe, Je m'appelle Jacques Brel !
>
> And if my brothers stay silent, well so much for them (feminine)
> I sing, persist and sign, I am Jacques Brel! (My translation)

Brel calls out his brothers (fellow Belgian compatriots) but, in an unexpected twist, ends the self-enclosed line with "elles," the feminine pronoun of "them." This intentional gender appropriation is both sexist and offensive, since it implies that those who are not manly enough to speak up are either "girls" or "chickens." In all likelihood, the deliberate misuse of the pronoun "elles" was initiated by the fact that it beautifully rhymes with "Brel."

If *Les F…* represents an extreme version of Brel's political views, there are other examples of Brel's deep criticism of society which illustrate his disdain in a more tactful manner. When it comes to the aristocracy, for instance, Brel's texts are often peppered with subtler forms

of disapproval. *La Dame patronnesse* (The Lady Patron) pointedly illustrates his "tongue-in-cheek" satire.

Written and performed in 1959, *La Dame patronnesse* projects an aristocratic environment reminiscent of a Mozartian String Quartet. Tuned about 8 Hz (vibrations per second) higher than today's instruments, the stringed instruments in the background create the illusion of an important chamber music recital for an aristocratic audience— "La Dame patronnesse." As a side joke, however, Brel intentionally inserts dissonances in the string accompaniment, even going beyond the occasional non-chord tone. "Dissonance" is a euphemism, really, given that the notes are plainly wrong. Although these dissonant sounds are nearly all written out as non-chord tones (some are not included in the score), they are inevitably serving a larger purpose. The argument here is that non-chord tones, depending on their context, do not even sound as such and as a result the musical discourse acquires satirical overtones.

At first glance, the music of *La Dame patronnesse* seems very symmetrical and arpeggiated. In fact, apart from a few inversional changes, the harmonic language is limited to a simple tonic-subdominant-dominant (I-IV-V) progression. Although the vocal-piano reduction is missing a few notes, the piano part presents the accompaniment and melodic line in their entirety. Coupled with a large amount of contrary motion, the arpeggiation and melody are nearly always complementary, allowing the tonal center of the chanson to remain rather static and unvaried. This lack of variation adds an extra layer of criticism to the matriarchal patroness, giving the impression that everything revolves around her. Appropriately, the line that includes most of the dissonances—the middle line—is used to represent the "patronne." Everything moves around her individual line, and her thoughts are peppered with dissonant ideologies:

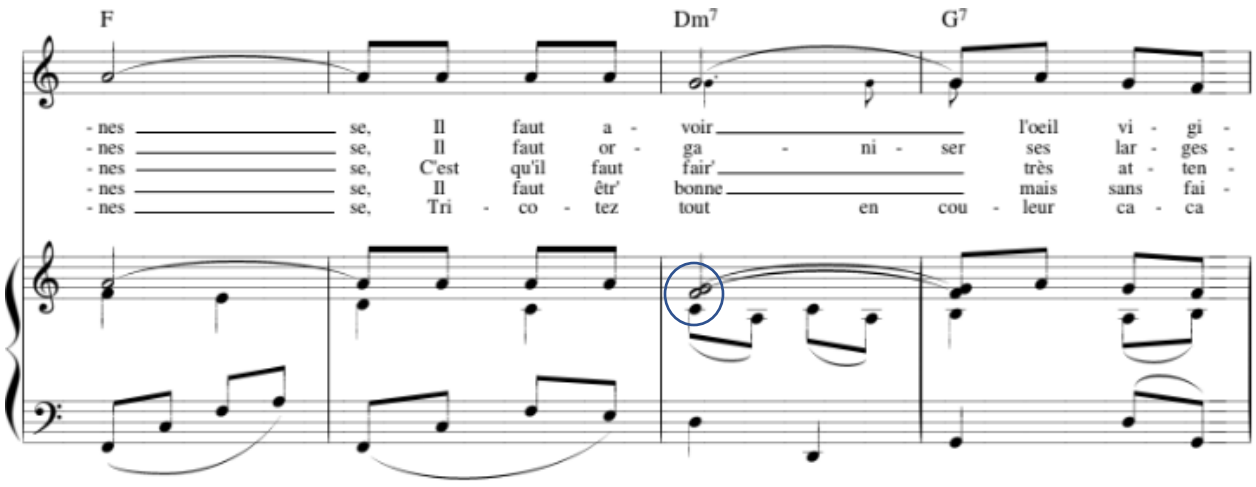


Figure 9: Measures 7-10 from *La Dame patronnesse*, illustrating described tonal interactions. Dissonant Major 2nd in piano, measure 9.
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As with *Quand on n'a que l'amour* and *Les Désespérés*, I have included the poetic outline of *La Dame patronnesse*, with the rhyme scheme color-coded in a similar manner. Most notably, within five stanzas, there are only three rhyme schemes: ABBABA, AABBBB, and ABABAB. In each of these cases, the final two lines are presented merely as a repetition of the same lines from before. Although we could write out the equation as simply 5(6+4), it would be more accurate to analyze the chanson as **5[(4+2) + 4]**. The same music is still used for all five "quatrains" and the refrain, a formal scheme typically used in popular music.[59]

Almost without fail, the dissonances occur on longer tones, allowing the effect of the dissonance to take full charge. The first dissonance, appearing over the word "a**voir**," encapsulates a major second interval between the patronne's middle voice and the melodic line.[60] Rather unusually, the dissonance in this case is more easily attributed to the melodic line itself. Each of the tones that create the dissonant sound, here, the A and F (indicated in Figure 9), belong to the harmonic function that Brel has included above.

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Il faut avoir l'œil vigilant
Car, comme le prouvent les événements
Quatre-vingt-neuf tue la noblesse
Car, comme le prouvent les événements
Quatre-vingt-neuf tue la noblesse

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Il faut organiser ses largesses
Car, comme disait le duc d'Elbeuf
"C't'avec du vieux qu'on fait du neuf"
Car, comme disait le duc d'Elbeuf
"C't'avec du vieux qu'on fait du neuf"

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
C'est qu'il faut faire très attention
À n'pas se laisser se voler ses pauvresses
C'est qu'on serait sans situation
À n'pas se laisser se voler ses pauvresses
C'est qu'on serait sans situation

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Il faut être bonne, mais sans faiblesse
Ainsi, j'ai dû rayer de ma liste
Une pauvresse qui fréquentait un socialiste
Ainsi, j'ai dû rayer de ma liste
Une pauvresse qui fréquentait un socialiste

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Mesdames, tricotez tout en couleur caca d'oie
Ce qui permet, le dimanche, à la grand-messe
De reconnaître ses pauvres à soi
Ce qui permet, le dimanche, à la grand-messe
De reconnaître ses pauvres à soi

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Figure 10: Text for *La Dame patronnesse* with written-out rhyme scheme.

Between each other, the tones above form a minor 6th relation, given how they are written out. For these reasons, the G in the melodic line is what causes the disturbance in the sound. Already presented in the fourth measure of the song, this melodic tone is now being paired with the original as part of the tonic triad. This re-appropriation of the same chord tone gives a

particularly striking negligence to the attitude of the patronne, a musical technique that was not rare in Mozart's music.

La Dame patronnesse reflects a great amount of musical text painting. The musical setting is extremely arpeggiated through the use of contrary motion between hands. In the fifth and final stanza Brel insists:

> To be a good lady patron
> Ladies, knit everything in the color of goose poop
> So that, on Sundays, at the main mass
> Your own poor crowd can be easily recognized
> (My translation)

The verb "tricoter" ("knit"), used here in its imperative form "tricotez," encapsulates the expressive meaning of both the refrain and the concluding stanza: the lady patron's mechanical knitting is anything but heartfelt. Brel's chanson is built upon knitting as an extended trope. More specifically, each of the knitting "points" become a metaphor for the successive beads of the Roman Catholic church's rosary. The mechanics of knitting echo the mechanics of "praying" the rosary, in that the stitches represent tellings of the rosary's beads—the lady patron goes through the stitch pattern as artificially and obsessively as she would pray the rosary:

> And a purl stitch
> And a plain stitch[61]
> A stitch for Saint Joseph
> A stitch for Saint Thomas

The mechanical analogy connotes superficiality and suggests that the patroness helps the poor for social appearances only. Brel suggests she knit everything with Dijon-mustard-yellow yarn (the color of goose poop) so that the poor who wear her hand-knitted garments can be easily

identified at Sunday mass. Additionally, he remarks that she will definitely not help those with "un-aristocratic, socialist" beliefs.

Brel exemplifies the mechanical quality of the "one point forward, one point backward" patterning in his musical setting. As demonstrated in Figure 11, the use of arpeggiation in contrary motion corresponds directly to the central poetic conceit, the pattern of knitting (one plain stitch, one purl stitch). The same music is used each time for the refrain, with the tonal trajectory rising for the "backwards" (purl) stitch and falling back down for the "forward" (plain) stitch. This melodic curve is replicated in the second half of the refrain before itself ending on the tonic.

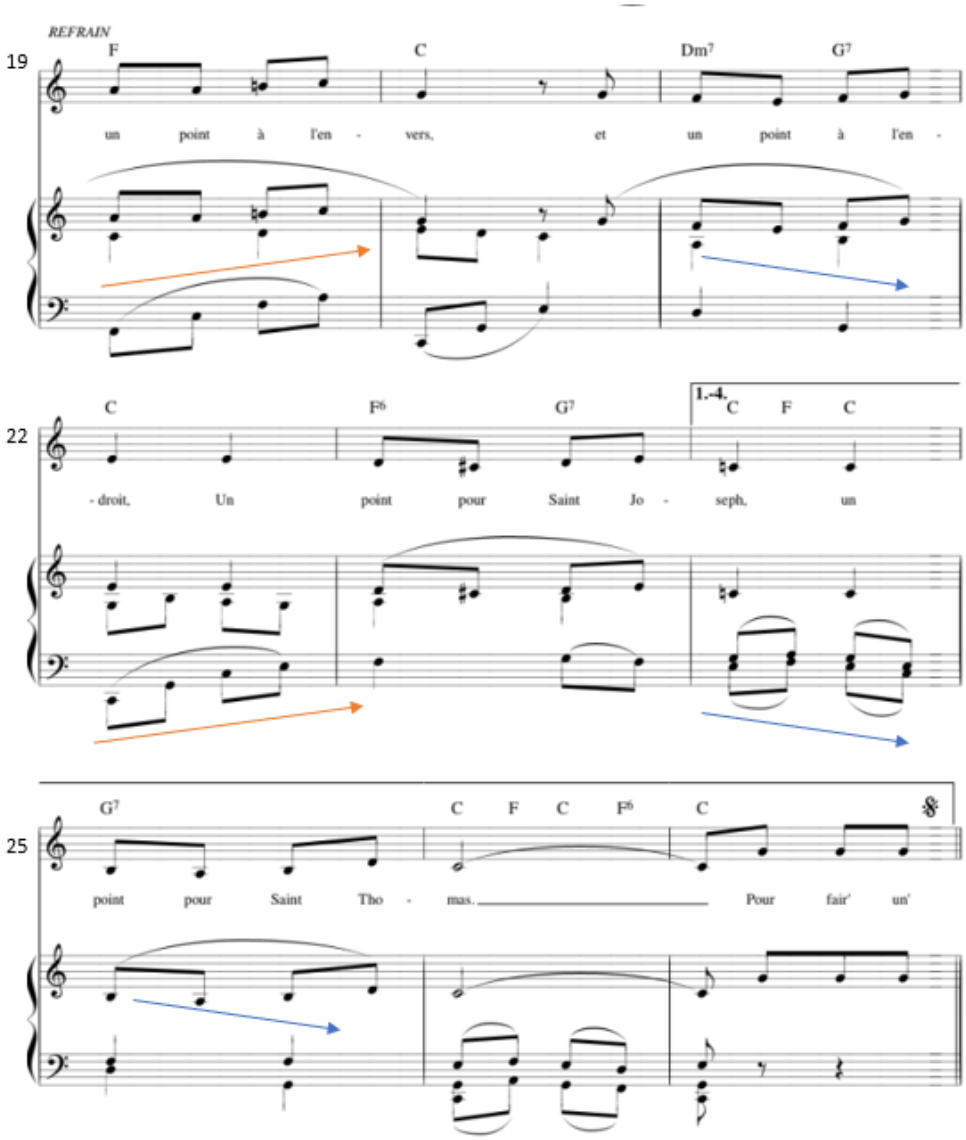

Figure 11 Refrain for *La Dame patronnesse.* The arrows indicate a vague interpretation of this "backward"/"forward" movement. Measures 19-27.
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Not exclusive to the refrain, this tendency to go up and back down obsessively repeats itself throughout the song. On several occasions, there are even synchronized contrary motion patterns, illustrating the obsessive regularity of the knitting pattern, or even just the stitch itself—the music is tropologically interwoven to create a web of social appearances that illuminates its own

contradictions and half-mindedness. Not to mention that a plain stitch on one side of a knitted fabric looks exactly like a purl stitch on the other side, which could also be viewed as musical contrary motion.[62]

In addition to these text painting properties, Brel noticeably incorporates the use of line repetitions. Without exception, each of the six-line stanzas (thus excluding the four-line refrains) are built in a **4+2** form, with the last two lines being a direct repetition of each other. Brel adds a level of commentary to the narrative: this is silly knitting. In each case, the two lines repeated occur in direct succession. What is to be noted here, however, is the repetition occurring in groups of two. Two lines are repeated, rather than two occurrences of one repeated line. This is an alternative form to having one line repeated twice, and it emphasizes "togetherness" in that it allows the audience to give equal importance to both repeated lines. As a result of these repetitions, the text is, technically speaking, written as a series of ten quatrains.

La Dame patronnesse is not one of Brel's biggest hits, and, in fact, there are very few recordings of this chanson. Unlike *Les Désespérés*, Brel did perform this song live, which inevitably opened the door to a multitude of improvisatory changes. Although all versions that I observed include an obvious, musically-inflected linguistic accent on the G analyzed above, the recordings do not explicitly match the note values presented in the score. Brel's best-known recording of *La Dame patronnesse*, finished at the same time as *Ne me quitte pas* (one of the most covered songs in his discography), emphasizes the G in the vocal line, but it is definitely not a half note in comparison to the surrounding eighth notes. At most, the melodic tone in this recording is a quarter note, which is close to being the same as in the live recordings. Nevertheless, upon examining four different scores— including the original manuscript—I observed that Brel never writes out this note as anything less than a half note. In fact, in all but

one edition it is notated as a half note tied to an additional eighth note in the following measure, with the remaining edition providing the extra note, but leaving the tie out. I interpret this difference as meaning that the scores were written to allow the poetic text to flow musically, given the measured constraints. In reality, Brel takes more liberties than he can notate, which could be interpreted as a miniature metrical alteration. While this discrepancy does not change the above analysis, it does expose an inconsistency between Brel's interpretations and the actual scores, a topic for research in itself.[63]

Music and Poetry as One—Modulatory Lyricism

Most of Brel's chansons are unquestionably written with the text being set to music. But there are exceptions, such as *Les Désespérés*, which is written with the music set to text. And then there is *Quand maman reviendra* (When Mom Returns), which is rather unique in that it is neither text set to music or music set to text. As it turns out, we have full film documentation of Brel writing *Quand maman reviendra* **[4(11+1) + 4]**, a chanson requested—in 1963—by journalist Francis Lalanne, as a song "for the new year."[64] This chanson, surprisingly, is not a criticism of anyone or any group of individuals. Written from the point of view of a 20-year-old, the song is a celebration of hope: mom, brother, sister, even dad will all come back to the love of their family, and especially to the love of the narrator/protagonist.

The documentary, which chronicles the writing process of *Quand maman reviendra,* features Brel having a casual conversation with Lalanne, while simultaneously inventing the chanson. Brel seems quite nervous and jittery as he jumps from one topic to the next and keeps asking Mr. Lalanne if he knows his recently released chanson, *Les Bigotes* (The Bigots—the journalist's answer is "yes, but it's not for me"). Even so, Brel writes the story for *Quand maman reviendra* as he speaks. A guitar in hand, he states immediately that the harmonic language should be simple, with only a single change between Major and minor sonorities—a notion he respects, but not fully, in the final version.

On top of this rather "simple" approach, Brel hums the melody *while* making up the lyrics. This is quite different from most of his other songs, which are written with the text being set to music, or even *Les Désespérés*, which bases its text upon pre-written musical material. *Quand maman reviendra* starts with a melodic line, and then the text revolves around that musical idea. The language still plays a crucial role, with Brel changing verb inflections in the

text, which in turn changes the rhythm. At the start of the writing process, the very first sentence, "Quand maman reviendra" ("When mom will return") is drafted first as "Quand maman revient" ("When mom returns") and then as "Quand maman va revenir" ("When mom is going to return"). Even though all three versions are similar in meaning, the earlier drafts have one syllable less (5) or more (7) than the third and final version, the one using "reviendra" (6). More importantly, they do not all have the same melodic *parcours.* "Reviendra," Brel's final version, has a very slight upwards motion on the final syllable **dra**, as preserved from his setting of "revient," but "revenir" actually goes down in that same place. In Brel's manuscript, we can see that he purposefully maintains this upward motion, on the exact syllabic sound. Moreover, in the final draft, Brel includes the possessive *ma* (my) in the lyrics (not in the title). I interpret this additional syllable (ma maman/my mom) as a way to enable the phrase to end on the following downbeat. Also, the possessive adjective "my" emphasizes the narrative agency of the text. It enables Brel to adopt the persona of a heartbroken but hopeful 20-year old—"Quand il paraît qu'on a vingt ans" ("When it appears one is twenty"). As Brel explains in his interview with Mr. Lalanne:

> C'est une chanson d'espoir […] sur l'absence […] de la musique naïve […] c'est pour un gars de vingt ans, mais ce n'est pas un bourgeois, parce qu'un bourgeois ne sait pas ce qu'il lui manque à vingt ans.
>
> This is a song of hope […] about absence […] it is naive music […] the song is for a twenty-year old guy but not for a bourgeois, because a bourgeois would not know what he is missing at twenty years of age. (My translation)

In Brel's words, both the music and the lyrics of *Quand maman reviendra* must be intentionally naive because they are written by an imaginary 20-year-old, a non-bourgeois who is hopeful that

his emotional needs will be met someday. The narrative voice and musical discourse are deliberately unsophisticated to imply a level of consciousness not realized by the protagonist (mom will probably never return):

Quand ma maman reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand elle reviendra, maman
Qui c'est qui s'ra content, c'est moi
Elle reviendra comme chaque fois
À cheval sur un chagrin d'amour
Et pour mieux fêter son retour
Toute la sainte famille s'ra là
Et elle me r'chantera les chansons
Les chansons que j'aimais tellement
On a tellement besoin d'chansons
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Quand mon frère, y reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand y reviendra, l'Fernand
Qui c'est qui s'ra content, c'est moi
Y reviendra de sa prison
Toujours à cheval sur ses principes
Y r'viendra, et toute l'équipe
L'accueillera sur le perron
Et y m'racontera les histoires
Les histoires que j'aimais tellement
On a tellement besoin d'histoires
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Quand ma sœur, elle reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand r'viendra la fille d'maman
Qui c'est qui sera content, c'est moi
Elle reviendra de Paris
Sur le cheval d'un prince charmant
Elle reviendra, et toute la famille
L'accueillera en pleurant
Et elle me redonnera son sourire
Son sourire que j'aimais tellement
On a tellement besoin d'sourires
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Quand mon papa reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand y r'viendra en gueulant
Qui c'est qui s'ra content, c'est moi
Y r'viendra du bistrot du coin
À cheval sur une idée noire
Y r'viendra que quand y sera noir
Que quand il en aura b'soin
Et y me redonnera des soucis
Des soucis que j'aime pas tellement
Mais paraît qu'y faut des soucis
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Si ma maman revenait
Qu'est-ce qu'y serait content, papa
Si ma maman revenait
Qui c'est qui s'rait content, c'est moi.

Figure 12 Original text with color-coded rhyme scheme for *Quand maman reviendra.*

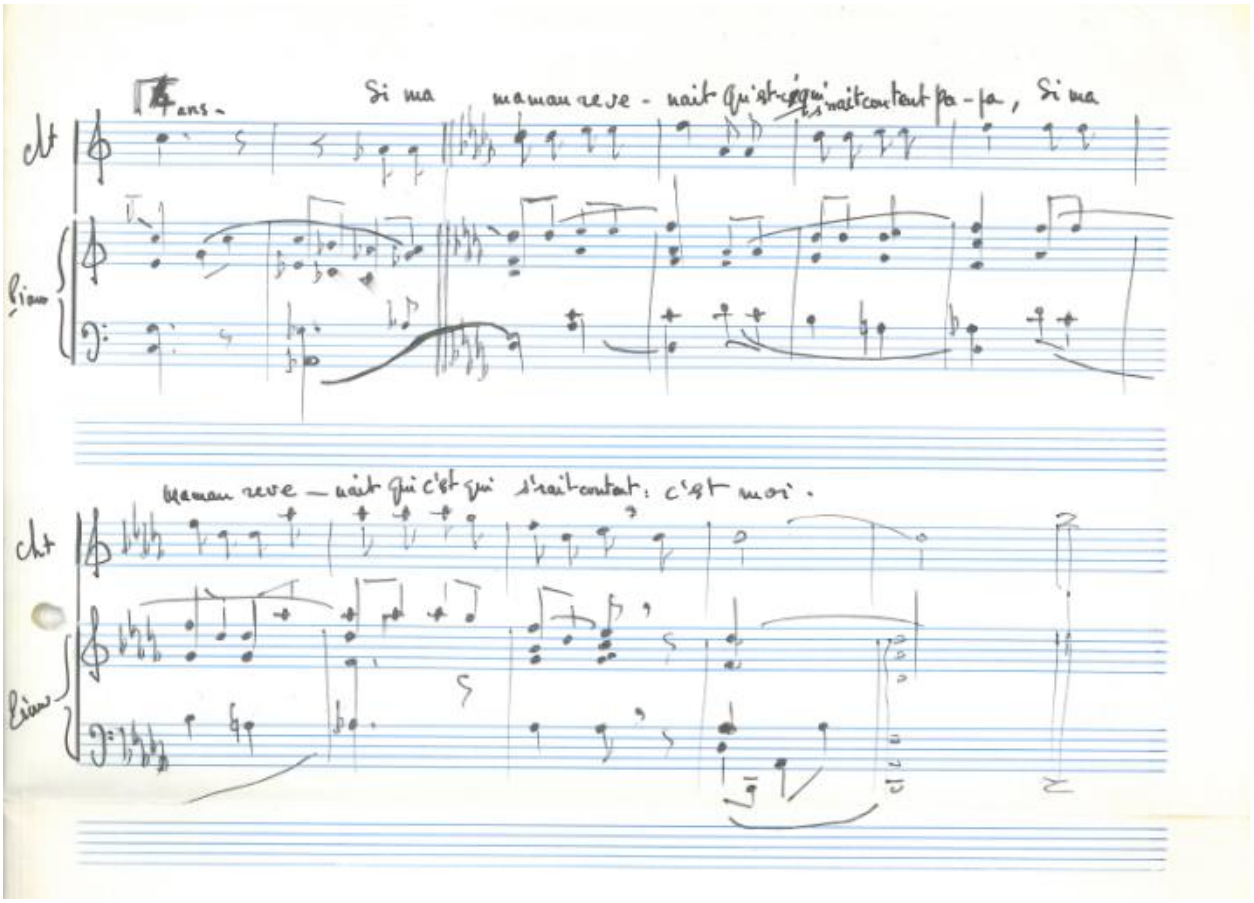

Figure 13 Manuscript of *Quand maman reviendra* with the incorrect notation and Neapolitan modulation to D-flat Major -- measures 28-38.
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Simplicity and naiveté shape both the melodic and accompanimental figures of Brel's music. With respect to the melody, the entire song never exceeds an octave range, whilst the rhythm, apart from the ends of phrases (natural poetic line breaks), is built almost entirely on eighth notes. This best preserves the relative equality of non-stressed syllables in spoken French poetry. The accompaniment, meanwhile, is based upon intentionally out-of-tune chordal progressions, with some chromatic enhancements.[65] Along with Brel's voice which appears to be on the verge of crying, the simplicity evokes a deep message of innocent hope mixed with sadness.

There are two more curiosities in *Quand maman reviendra*. First, it is extremely bizarre that, despite Brel's deep understanding of musical settings and classical music, his manuscript is full of notational errors. Stems are nearly all on the wrong side of the notes, accidentals are unclear and often on the wrong line, and some measures do not even have the right number of beats. While these minor inaccuracies do not change the interpretation of the chanson, they are, in my opinion, symptomatic of Brel's instinctive writing style (music and text). If so much is based upon instinct, then trying to formulate a methodology for Brel's songwriting may become a Herculean task.

Secondly, the final stanza is inflected by a chillingly beautiful modulation to the distantly related key of D-flat Major. Only a half-step higher than the home key of C Major, this transformation to the Neapolitan serves as a form of musical text painting, a way of "illuminating" the final four lines (**+4** in the form equation). The transformation is further portrayed through a change of verb tense to the conditional in the varied refrain. Throughout the song, the narrator/protagonist tells the audience of things that will happen "when" his mother returns. Cut to the final four lines, however, and the chanson transitions into a conditional "if" tense (if mom were to return). This grammatical change gives the impression that the young man may not be that optimistic about his mother's return, an impression that is amplified by the half-step modulation. However, the Neapolitan modulation gives a feeling of hope. The protagonist spends the entire song explaining that "when" something happens in the future, his father will be happy about it, but ends the song by stating that "if" that same event were to occur, then both he and his father would be happy. It makes sense to include the modulation for the last line as the expressive focus. D-flat Major represents the young man's own hopes, perhaps a half step higher to illustrate increased certainty or, at the very least, increased optimism.

One of the reasons why the Neapolitan modulation is so effective is the change in dynamic level, or more precisely, a change in "sentence sounds."[66] *Quand maman reviendra* has a dynamic environment that is rather static for the duration of the song. Each of the first four stanzas is set to the same music, with the dynamic level never really changing. Reflecting the narrator's sad underlying tone, this near constant curve possesses an enormous amount of emotional baggage, with each line suggesting a change in aural harmonies. The prominence of the emotional agent keeps the chanson dramatically interesting. As the narrator's tension increases, so does the agential and emotional involvement on the part of the listener. The longer the chanson goes on, the more the audience begins to identify with the narrator's hardships.

It is not surprising, given Brel's deep influences from Romantic music, to notice similarities between Brel's *Quand maman reviendra* and Schubert's *Morgengruss* (1823). Structurally, Schubert's four-line-four-minute art song is very similar to Brel's chanson, except for the lack of a real refrain. In spite of its curiously simple form and compositional technique, *Morgengruss* is the subject of a nearly 150-page analytical essay by David Lewin, with over 60 pages dedicated to a single tone.[67] This simplicity is mostly due to Schubert's notating the four stanzas strictly strophically.[68] Much the same applies to Brel's setting of *Quand maman reviendra* which is also notated strophically.

Beyond having each of the 12-line stanzas set to the same music, Lewin's observations about the change in musical meaning in *Morgengruss* also apply to *Quand maman reviendra*. In his essay, Lewin explains that Schubert's song revolves around the narrative properties of the text in order to convey the meaning through the music. In this way, the music's "lack" of variety and the plethora of interpretations eliminate the overruling of music over text which occurs in many German art songs. In the case of *Morgengruss*, variety of melodic material is maintained

through the musicians' performative decisions with regard to inflection, articulation, and dynamics. Brel's *Quand maman reviendra* introduces a similar tactic. With this chanson, however, it is the interpretation of the tonal highpoint in each line which takes on the role of semantic motivation. Occurring three times within each strophe—each time projecting a different meaning—these highpoints reveal the subdivision of each stanza into three identical "quatrains."

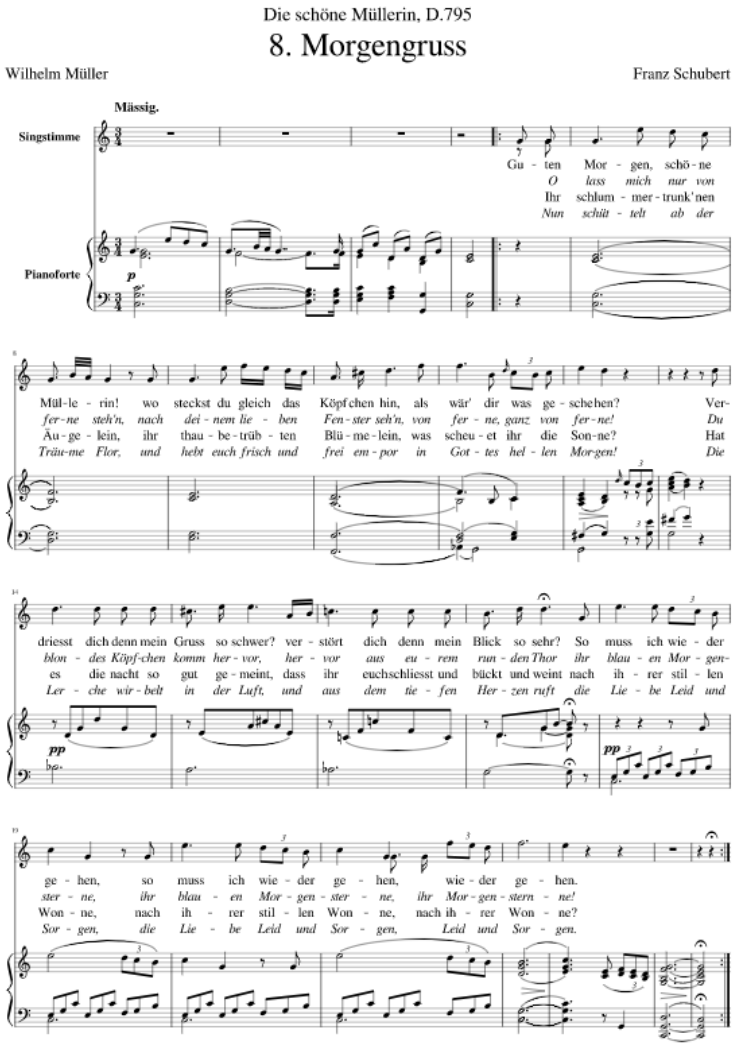


Figure 14 Full score for Schubert's *Morgengruss.*

Moreover, each of these three phrases gives a new meaning to each of the highpoints, despite all of them leading from scale degrees **1 → 5**. The entire stanza revolves around the movement from **1 → 5** through two different octaves. The melody is so simple that, at its most

basic form, it is formulated only as this scale degree pattern with several passing tones. Due to this repetition throughout the strophes, the additional whole tone stretch at the end is barely noticed by the casual listener. It simply blends in with the naive, uncomplicated narrative line.

In both the Schubert and the Brel examples, each performer will convey the interpretive and performative agencies differently. Given the repetitive nature of both songs, the changes occur when the performative agent is most present—on stage. Dynamics, voice intonation, brighter inclination of modulations—these are all variants controlled by the performers themselves, and such personal adjustments cannot be fully notated by the composer.

I include the dynamic wave for *Quand maman reviendra*'s final 12-line strophe, leading into the modulation to the Neapolitan for the additional 4 lines. This change of key transports the listener into a different reality.

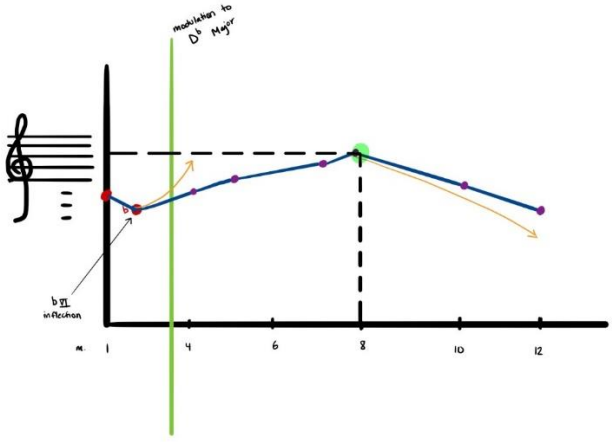


Figure 15 Curve for last twelve measures of *Quand maman reviendra.*

Defining Brel's Dynamic Curves. Making a point.

In his thesis on Rachmaninov's Piano Preludes, Jason Stell describes the dynamic curve[69] as the "process of moving through dramatic sections […] upon an interaction of tension and resolution." The "defining feature of the dynamic curve," Stell adds, "is its single climax."[70] One of Stell's dynamic curve models, Rachmaninov's Prelude in D Major, Op. 23, No. 4, perfectly illustrates this concept. Abundant in its use of middle-voice counterpoint, this piece provides the highpoint of the dynamic curve through the resolution of the chromatically inflected German augmented-sixth chord (of the "wrong" key) in measures 50 and 51. The growth from *pianissimo* in the opening measures up to the *fortissimo* of the German +6 chord, followed by the large twenty-measure decrescendo back down to the original *pianissimo*, provides the perfect arch curve leading to an asymmetrical, late climax. Most of Brel's significations—similar to dynamically asymmetrical bell-curves "in nature"—conform to this concept, with Brel's *Mon enfance* (My Childhood) being a prime example. Even more asymmetrical than Rachmaninov's Prelude, Brel's *Mon enfance* strives in its growth through each stanza, reaching a highpoint with the reference to the author's adolescent years at the end.

Written as a commemoration, *Mon enfance* attempts to re-capture Brel's childhood through the lens and settings of the Far West.[71] Starting similarly to the Rachmaninov in a *pianissimo* setting with an arpeggiated left-hand accompaniment in D-flat Major, the chanson introduces a simple textual setting with voice, a very romantically decorated piano accompaniment, and occasional cello bass notes. *Mon enfance* celebrates the seemingly simple life of a child. As the song progresses, the timbral thickness increases and the child's life appears to fill itself with more and more memories, ideas, and imagery, while still maintaining its

original melodic contour. It is not until measure 56 that we get an extremely Schubertian modulation, coupled with an exponentially increasing dynamic level. Only a few measures later, however, we get a *diminuendo* back into the original *pianissimo* environment, allowing the song (and child) to settle down and rest. In terms of dynamic curvature, *Mon enfance* is a near-perfect replication of the Rachmaninov Prelude Op. 23, No. 4. I include the dynamic curve below, along with my own interpretation of the Prelude as a comparison.[72]

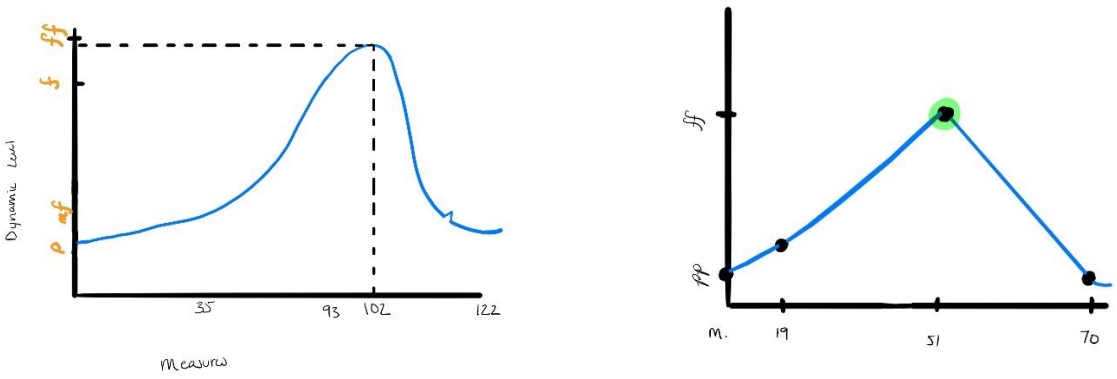


Figure 16 Dynamic curves for Rachmaninov's *Prelude No. 4, Op. 23* and *Mon enfance* (respectively). The slight point at the end of the Brel example (left) indicates a sudden accent in measure 115.

Ne me quitte pas (Do Not Leave Me) is another song by Brel whose dynamic highpoint is very similar to that of Rachmaninov's Prelude. This chanson thrives in the progressiveness of the upward scale. For the most part, the melodic line slowly goes down by step, all the way to the third of the dominant chord, G#. At the end of the song, we hear the reverse climb *up* to the tonic, embellished by greater chromaticism. The tonal highpoint, a full octave above the original *mi*, pairs with the dynamic highpoint and the words *ciel* (heaven) and *amour* (love). From here, the music decrescendos down to its original *piano* dynamic, allowing us to parabolically end where we started. As a result, the curve looks something like:

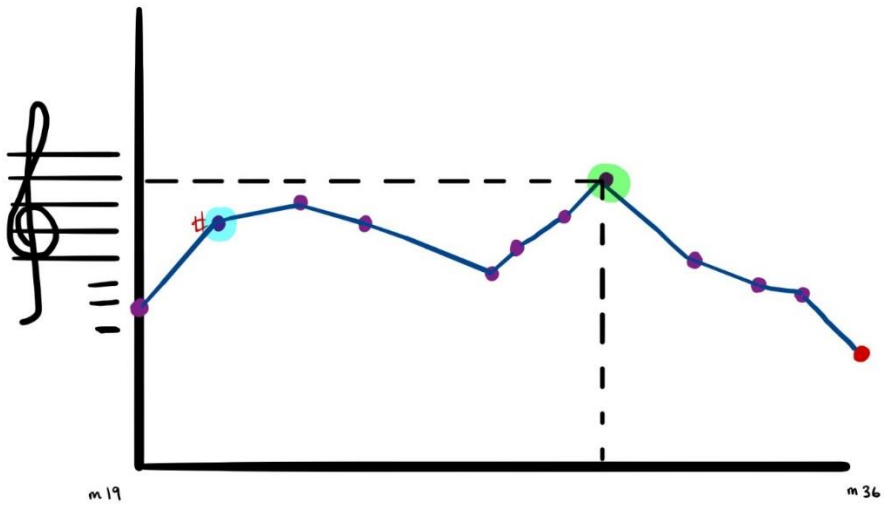


Figure 17 Dynamic curve for *Ne me quitte pas* with the highpoint in measure 28. The blue highlighter indicates a temporary tonicization to the dominant key. Measures 19-36.

While many of Brel's chansons nicely fit into Stell's concept of the dynamic curve, there are exceptions. As such, a form of agential variation occurs. Principally due to Brel's extensive linguistic approach to songwriting, *Amsterdam*, one of his most iconic songs, is one such exception. A strikingly detailed tableau of the Dutch city's harbor and its sailors' immoral behavior, Brel's *Amsterdam* reflects anger and disapproval through a consistently rising dynamic curve.

As is typical of storytelling, the heart of *Amsterdam*'s message is prefaced by an "exposition" which serves the purpose of introducing the characters' environment. When Brel performs *Amsterdam* on stage, his energy level is particularly intense, yet he gives the illusion of calmness. As the song moves along and the intention to overtly criticize becomes increasingly clear, so does the musical setting—instrumentation, dynamics, and timbre all grow together in a near parabolic motion.

Unlike most of Brel's works, each stanza of *Amsterdam* is completely written out in the score, with the dynamic marks and tempo changes much more specific than in his other songs. This musical journey, which takes us from a *Piano, Andantino* setting to a much more vigorous *Fortissimo, Piu Allegro con moto* environment, transports the performer and the audience alike from the calm ocean waters all the way to sweaty, prostituted sex. *Amsterdam*, recorded by Brel only three times in his career and only in concert-form, comes alive through the thickening timbral texture of Brel's voice and his ferociously sweaty acting performances.[73] What is unusual about this dynamic curve is the lack of a definite high point and the subsequent downhill stretch of an asymmetrical dynamic curve.

A definite variant to the Rachmaninov Prelude and to *Mon enfance*, *Amsterdam*'s dynamic curve functions more as a narrative agent than as a "Rachmaninov" dynamic curve.[74]

Therefore, it is necessary to examine this curve from a different perspective, one of greater "artist acceptance," allowing us to distinguish between "life and art." As Barney Childs explains:

> The Western European intellectual and cultural tradition has seemingly found most fundamental a basic structural organization of a work of time art, what might be called a narrative curve […] material-characters, musical sound […] actions, relationships, and responses […] a high point or revelation or climax or catastrophe or dénouement is reached; resolution or relaxation or "falling action" follows; concluding gesture or comment is made-again archetypally, the renewal of cosmic order, of course altered from the origin.[75]

The importance of the highpoint, according to Childs, is the audience's connection to the highpoint's pneumonic properties. Simply put, the climax becomes the most important part of the chanson. In *Amsterdam*, the "expressive crux"[76] arrives at the end of the chanson—in other words, there is no real highpoint, given that it never comes back down. Instead of having the dynamic curve expectedly pictured as  , the curve continues to rise as an exponential, almost U-shaped curve  . Childs hypothesizes that, when we listen to music, we try to "make sense" of the sounds that we hear based on our own "culture and experience," thus creating the interpretive groundwork for the "narrative curve."[77] This association with differing interpretations is supported by Aaron Copland's claim that "the part of music we tend to be concerned with is usually melodic, though of course harmony, rhythm, texture, density, etc. may be later recognized as contributory."[78] This rings particularly true for Brel's *Amsterdam*: all of the attention is brought to Brel's performance and vocal line, with the instruments' dynamic and

narrative curves even more strongly supportive in the background than suggested by Copland's general observation.

While both Copland and Childs make their above-mentioned observations in the context of classical music and classical composers (including John Cage), these concepts are applicable to most musical genres. Given the tendency in Brel's chansons for music to mirror the contours of the French language, the narrative curve is clearly embodied in both the text and the melody. The curves (melodic, textual, and dynamic) all follow the same path—the path with which the audience connects the most. This is true for Brel's work in general, but most especially *Amsterdam*.

It should be pointed out that the notated dynamic and tempo changes in Brel's scores—particularly in *Amsterdam*—have the potential to change the dynamic curve rather dramatically and brusquely. However, I interpret these notated changes as progressive, not in the immediacy of the measure over which they are written. Based on Brel's most publicized recording of *Amsterdam*—the live debut performance from Olympia '64—not only do we have an intense crescendo, but also a simultaneously proportional tempo change.[79] Indeed, the tempo increases at a pace nearly identical to the dynamic curve. This means that if you were to graph the tempo in the same way as the dynamics, the representations would be almost identical. Despite the double bar lines and notated tempo marks, these seemingly sudden alterations do not create spikes or sudden changes in the curve; rather, they work together as part of the chanson's *Gestalt*. Moreover, this constant increase in tempo and dynamic level pairs well with Hatten's concept of gestural progressions. In this case, the gestural curve is specifically supportive of what Hatten calls "intensification" and "acceleration."[80] In terms of the piece's curve, these gestures contain both "gravitational"[81] and anti-gravitational properties. The "gravitational" gestures "originate as

[…] expressive movements"[82]—Brel physically enacting *Amsterdam*'s narrative—while the anti-gravitational gesture follows the curve itself. There is no "return" down to the point of departure. An interpretation of this "energetic shaping through time"[83] is drawn in the graph below:

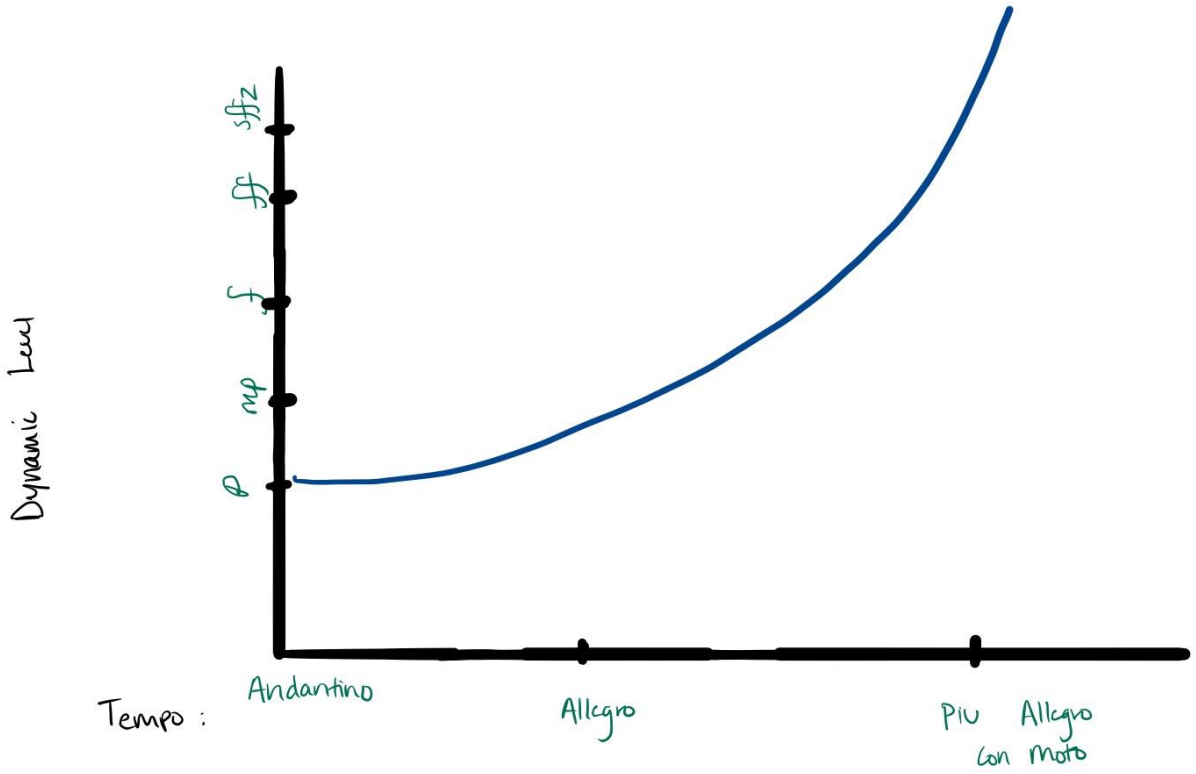


Figure 18: Tempo and Dynamic curve for *Amsterdam.*

Brel's inconsistent notation provides an important alteration to the interpretive and performative agents. The lack of tempo marking, much like in classical music, does not let the performer know how a song should be executed. Hence, we automatically take Brel's

performance as the only possible interpretation. While this may be the case, it creates two compositional issues:

1. In order to have a real sense of the chanson, we must have access to either a live performance or a recording from the composer, which may not always be possible.
2. Whether live performances or studio recordings, no two versions will ever be identical. The lack of written instructions on the part of the composer does not allow performers to figure out the songs for themselves. This is especially true for Brel, whose scores have very few articulation marks.

Take, for instance, *Quand on n'a que l'amour*. Upon close examination of three different score editions (one of which, an original "band" copy I cannot include for copyright reasons), I notice the complete lack of tempo markings. This chanson has been translated and re-recorded in nearly 80 different languages. In all of these, the melody line remains intact, but only at the tonal level.[84] After I listened to a large portion of these recordings (many of which are not available outside of the Brel Foundation in Brussels), it became clear that the rhythm and tempi vary from one version to another, even within Brel's own re-interpretations. Despite these modifications, on every occasion, it takes only the first six notes for the listener to recognize the chanson. This freedom of interpretation demonstrates the composer's intent to connect the text to a melodic idea, while the arrangement and notated elements are second in line. Reminiscent of jazz musicians who allow the music to fill in the moment and who create arrangements on the spot,

Brel's scores are only a musical outline meant to open the door to a multitude of interpretive choices—with many possible variants when projecting the narrative and performative agents.[85]

The Double Dynamic Highpoint (DDHP)

Throughout my report, I have aimed to expose and investigate several dynamic curvatures. As is typical of programmatic music, however, the narrative path is not always as straightforward as to have just one single climactic high point[86] or, in fact, a constant crescendo. *Ces gens-là* ("Those People"), a song about prejudice and intolerance, presents the interesting case of a double dynamic highpoint (DDHP). Immediately apparent is the overall lack of harmonic content in this chanson—in fact, only 10 out of 137 measures feature a different harmony (relative Major) and dynamic level. Moreover, these 10 measures are formulated only as a temporary tonicization—the chord functions themselves do not change, nor are we presented with a full modulatory formula. Debuting in measure 84, after nearly three minutes of this otherwise *mezzo-piano*/recitative-style chanson, the dynamic curve spikes upward.

Although a seemingly gradual *crescendo*, the intensity increases quite suddenly in the context of the song, with the narrator bitingly condemning bigotry. Presenting us for the first time with Frida, Brel's anger is projected at the others' assumption that he is not worthy of Frida's love, and that he is only good at killing cats. This is demonstrated via the use of the DDHP, with the first ending at *"Que moi j'aime Frida"* ("That I love Frida") and the second at *"Parce que les autres veulent pas"* ("Because the others don't want me to"). Simultaneously, as is typical of increased volume, the instrumentation grows to a nearly full symphonic sound in both cases, giving the crescendo a very natural feel. In between them, perhaps in a bid to increase the communicative effect with the audience, the dynamic curve drops down to the level the audience was used to, similar to the end of the second iteration. In this way, Brel enhances the importance of Frida. These two highpoints together create a "double-voiced"[87] story that conveys two consecutive messages: "I do love Frida, but the others think that I am not worthy of her."

The spike in dynamics emphasizes the text, all the while increasing the narrator's deep anger and condemnation of prejudice, two sentiments best portrayed as having two focal points connected via the same curve.

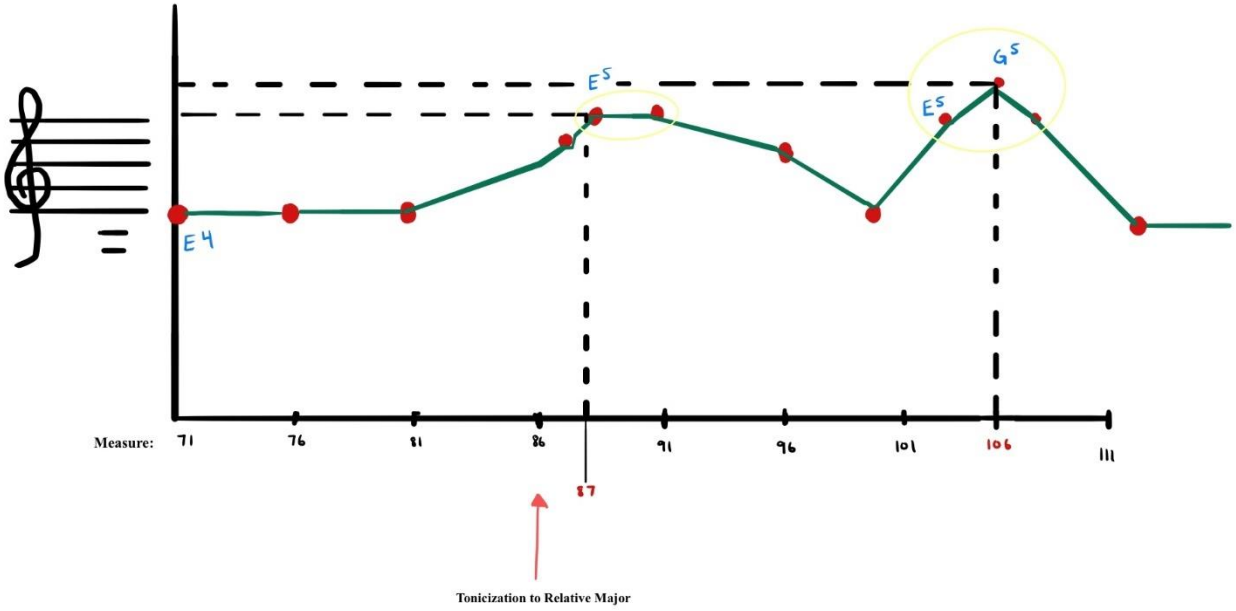


Figure 19: Dynamic curve graph for the DDHP in *Ces gens-là.* Although the DDHP is identical, the second iteration moves up to G5—a minor third above the first HP—which is reproduced in nearly all of Brel's recordings, causing the dynamic level to rise slightly higher than the first time. Additionally, I notate this via pitch tones and measure numbers, but it should be noted that the dynamic level follows this exact pattern. Hence, the DDHP notation—measures 71-112.

Brel's inclusion of the DDHP, as opposed to the single modulatory highpoint in *Quand maman reviendra* or the constant crescendo in *Amsterdam*, demonstrates a variant in the narrator's persona. Simon Frith explains that "how words work in a song depends not just on what is said […] but also [on] how it is said [and on] the kind of voice in which it is spoken."[88] Frith adds that this is particularly applicable to the French Chanson, given the performer's role as narrator. In this sense, *Ces gens-là* becomes the ultimate case of the performer/narrative agent

merger. Every word expressed in this chanson is given a persona and acted out by Brel, as demonstrated by the live recordings. The acting was so convincing that the first performance of this song, given at Carnegie Hall in 1965 to a mostly anglophone audience, received a standing ovation.

The effectiveness of the narrative and performative agents also relates to the surrounding elements of this particular chanson. The large diminuendo after the first curve, followed by the second—more unexpected—rise back to the modally inflected highpoint, gives the chanson a strikingly distinct, almost explosive ending to an otherwise rather somber texture. Although the DDHP constitutes two asymmetrical bell curves (as defined by Stell), the effectiveness is amplified by the rather flat curve of the first 70 measures. The DDHP's meaning and overall subjectivity are still being intensified despite Brel's limiting of dynamics (consistent *piano* setting), tonal range (not exceeding a third), and harmonic variety (restricted almost entirely to V-I).

In keeping with Stell's interpretation of the dynamic curve, Brel's *Ces gens-là* also demonstrates hierarchical highpoints. Unlike the hierarchy in a Schenkerian analysis, this form of highpoint relates more to a literary context. With *Ces gens-là*, the second highpoint is presented over the exact same music, with the highpoint being inflected a minor third higher than the first. This additional space, however, is not what defines the hierarchy—the text retains this job. Specifically, the return back down to *nearly* the original dynamic—without changing any notes between highpoints—creates a change in the narrative agent. The audience is surrounded by the same musical sounds, implying that the paradoxical mood does not change, but the expressive meaning of the second high point amplifies that of the first. We are still involved with Frida's dilemma (will she leave her prejudiced family and elope with the narrator?), but the

gravity of the situation is heightened (Frida says she will elope; the narrator suspects she will not). This dynamic route could be viewed as a "virtual" highpoint. The hierarchy changes for the listener, the text, and the narrator, but there are no changes on the score's outline. It is an interpretive change.

This form of narrative agent is expressed through a performance, rather than being written in a score, thus creating a narrative and performative agential dilemma. In this context, the dilemma comes out of the need for one to be present in order to explain the other. Particularly with the genre of the French Chanson, the narrative aspect grows out of the performance and the performative agent. It is therefore possible to analyze the narrative aspect as a virtual branch of the performative agent. For these reasons, it is much harder to convey the narrative agent's presence in a studio recording.

The concept of a virtual agent arising from the dynamic curves only intensifies the near redundancy of Brel's scores. As almost no interpretive notation is included in the score, we must count on Brel the performer for guidance. This creates a mirroring of the interpretive and performative agents, identical to those aligning with the single dynamic highpoint, but with an additional level of self-realization on the part of the narrator—Frida will never rise up against her narrow-minded family.

Concluding Comments

Throughout my report, I have assessed and interpreted eight of Brel's chansons using a form of integrative methodology. When I examined the songs through the poetic lens, I was able to determine that Brel's songs are indeed poetry. I also demonstrated how the compositional, textual, narrative, and lyrical techniques in Brel's work intersect and interact. When I introduced Hatten's theorized propositions (performative and compositional agencies, virtual agency, virtual subjectivity), it became apparent that Brel's chansons demonstrate an increase in "agitation"[89] of sonic waves, thereby intensifying the meaning of the poetic text and the musical discourse. Finally, when I connected the text to the musical setting, I was able to evaluate the effectiveness of the poetic discourse through the use of the dramatic curve and the dynamic highpoint. My observations revealed that most of Brel's works follow the dynamic curve with the intent of capitalizing on the poetic meaning of the text—as the song's argument becomes clearer, the music dramatically increases in intensity and volume. In the words of Rachmaninov, dynamic highpoints in Brel's chansons present a liberation of emotion, "the last barrier between truth and its expression," a moment that correlates "with the sound and sparkle of a ribbon snapped at the end of the race."[90]

While it is always possible to find exceptions or inconsistencies within the analyses that I propose, a methodology that integrates these concepts—poetic rhetoric, Hatten's theoretical principles, the dynamic highpoint—provides a way of organizing Brel's discography in a comprehensible and coherent manner. It is, of course, always possible to narrow down the categorizations even further, but this would involve a closer study of the French language in Brel's poetic texts. There is no denying that Brel's field of expertise is the French language (his musical notation is often incorrect), and one can also not deny how much the music's melodic

lines in his songs echo the spoken language's intonational curves. When combined with the theorem of the dynamic highpoint, my analyses reveal that many of Brel's chansons are shaped around the lines of a dynamic curve, from both a poetic and musical perspective. A closer examination of more chansons will have to await further research as well as consideration of other theorists' views.

Brel's accomplishments convey an unprecedented emotional baggage due primarily to the effectiveness of the performer himself, as well as the performative agents. Capitalizing on his struggles with school, love, society, and politics, Brel manages to transform the simplest ideas into works of art. He remains unique in his ability to evoke such artistry, and, even in the twenty-first century, the world continues to admire and salute him.

Brel's work, charisma, and passionate theatrics were so effective that he managed to impress even non-francophone artists. In 1968, about a decade before Brel's death, lyricists Eric Blau and Mort Shuman staged an adaptation of 25 Brel songs in a New York City Broadway show entitled *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris.* In terms of doing Brel justice, however, a Broadway musical is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, non-francophone audiences can fully grasp Brel's message and connect with his music on a personal level. On the other hand, because English is a Germanic language and French descends from Latin of the Roman Empire, translations are not always (and cannot always be) rhythmically and linguistically faithful. As Graeme Thomson rightfully observes, "Brel's humour, verve and honesty are tamed by the English language,"[91] through no fault of the translators. Nevertheless, the impact that Brel had on anglophone audiences cannot be overstated. Artists including David Bowie and Tom Jones even went so far as to cover English translations of Brel chansons during their concerts, most notably *Amsterdam* and *Ne me quitte pas*. Similarly, British singer-

songwriter Marc Almond recorded an entire album of Brel songs, *Jacques,* translated into English and re-interpreted in Almond's own synthesized style, despite his being fluent in French. Almond states in his admiration of Brel, "You don't necessarily have to understand every word he's singing—he makes you understand the story through the way he delivers it. He lives inside his songs." This comment ties in beautifully with Hatten's concept of virtual subjectivity—interpretive understandings are inferred but projected by the artist himself. Regrettably, with the album *Jacques* Almond sticks to songs that are both well-known and rather easy to translate—linguistically, rhythmically, and musically—which does not add much interest to the analyst. Also, the "new" versions have not much in common with Brel's original songs, other than the melodic line.

Issues with translation logistics, however, should not imply that the covers are not faithful to Brel's craftmanship. In fact, many translations were approved by Brel himself. During my research in Brussels, I had the extraordinary pleasure and unique privilege to meet Professor Francis de Laveleye, chairperson of the Brel Foundation and husband to Brel's daughter, France. I was deeply moved by several stories that he recounted, including his description of the importance of Brel's *Ne me quitte pas* (translated as *If You Go Away* by Rod McKuen). He explained that France Brel regularly stages the works of her father as a form of personal tribute, addressing audiences not just in Belgium but around the world. The highlight of the evening, according to de Laveleye, is always when France Brel presents *Ne me quitte pas,* due to the chanson's near-anthem status. Just at the mention of the song, all the audience members—including some who do not speak French—begin to sing the text set to the *mi-mi-fa-mi-mi* (fixed *do*, as taught in Europe) melodic line, all in their native tongue. By the end, everyone is in tears

at the beauty and emotional connection to the song, even with the text being entirely blurred through the heterophony of interacting languages.

Ne me quitte pas, which re-invents a couple of melodic and harmonic elements from Liszt's 6th Hungarian Rhapsody, not only epitomizes Brel's universality but also demonstrates, much like *Les Désespérés* with Ravel's concerto, how Brel sometimes prioritizes the musical setting. Both these examples connect the dots between a well-known musical composition and the poetic text, utilizing classical music to "elevate [words], to make them special, to give them a new form of intensity."[92] Singing is "self-revealing in a way that speaking is not," and it becomes increasingly important for the text to be paired with music, not just recited aloud. [93] This is true for all of Brel's works, which allow the music to "carry" the words. As I have demonstrated in this report, his texts are indeed poetry, but it is only through the chanson that their true message can be best conveyed.

I started my report by referencing Brel's own affirmation that he did not believe his works were poetry. After analyzing his chansons more attentively, I arrived at the conclusion that his songs are indeed poetry, but that they cannot be separated from their musical context. The epitaph by his tomb in the Marquesas islands reads:

> Passant,
>
> Homme de voiles
> Homme d'étoiles
> Ce troubadour
> Enchanta nos vies
> De la Mer du Nord
> Aux Marquises
>
> Le poète,
> Du bleu de son éternité
> Te remercie
> De ton passage

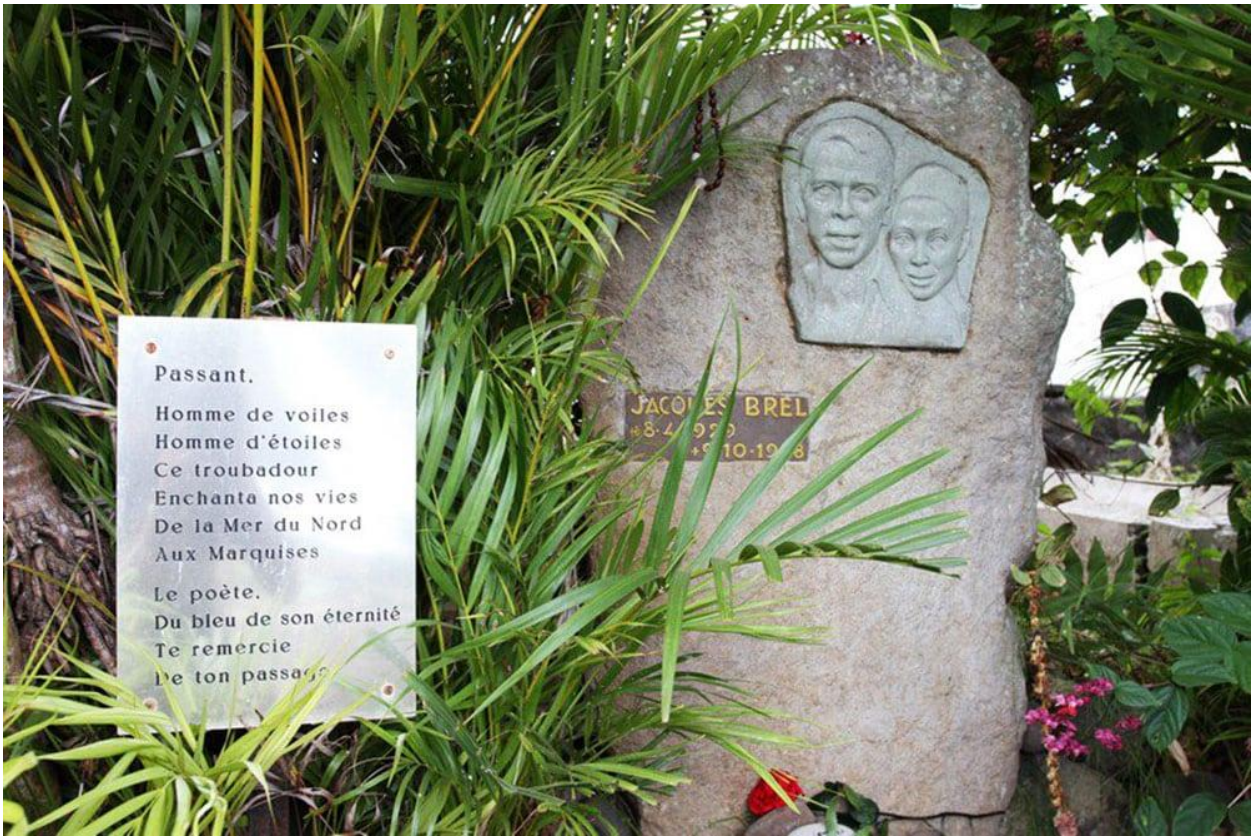
Passerby,

Man of the sails
Man of the stars
This troubadour
Has blessed our lives
From the North Sea
To the Marquesas

The poet,
From the blue aura of eternity
Thanks you
For passing by
(My translation)

Poetry is a musical form, but, for Brel, it is only when the poetic text is sung and accompanied by instrumentation that it shines its brightest. France Brel's beautiful epitaph allows me to draw my report to a close. The poet thanks you for visiting him and visiting his words. And so do I.

Un grand merci pour tout, Jacques.



"La tombe de Jacques Brel au cimetière d'Atuona, Hiva Oa. Photo Bruno Lupan"
The tomb of Jacques Brel in the Atuona, Hiva Oa cemetery.
https://www.tahitiheritage.pf/tombe-jacques-brel-hiva-oa/

Endnotes

[1] Brel, France, and la Fondation Jacques Brel. *Jacques Brel : Le droit de rêver*. Fondation Jacques Brel, Fondation d'utilité publique : Bruxelles, 2003.

[2] In a tour interview in Brussels, Brel is asked if two lines from *Le Plat Pays* ("The Flat Country," a reference to Belgium) do not, in fact, function as more than just lyrics. Although adamant of his claim, Brel acknowledges that the lines are quite poetic, but simply reading them out of context is not what he intended. In this way, Brel believes that on its own, his work could potentially be mislabeled simple "poetry."

[3] Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*, 161.

[4] *L'amour perdu* as I have decided to call this characteristic, refers to Brel's constant struggles with relationships and love. A common theme throughout his chansons, *l'amour perdu* is similar to Chris Tinker's "*mal-aimé.*"

[5] From Brel's chanson, *Mon enfance.*

[6] Hatten, Robert S. *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2018.

Hatten, Robert S. *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004.

[7] This even applies to music without text.

[8] The poetic forms vary, but each chanson abides by its own set of strict rules. Brel does not switch from one form to another within the same chanson.

[9] Stell, "Rachmaninov's Expressive Strategies," 14.

[10] Two of these examples, *Les F…* and *Amsterdam*, project a single dynamic highpoint, but it never truly reaches a "highpoint" as such. Instead, the song is a constant crescendo and the highpoint arrives after the end of the chanson, projected through Brel's anger.

[11] Frith, *Performing Rites*, 182.

[12] His harmonies were always based on the subject matter. For example, when writing *Quand maman reviendra*, he wanted to keep the harmonies limited, with a minor to Major alteration. He felt that this provided the contrast between the positive and the negative, reflected within the song's text.

[13] Frith, *Performing Rites*, 163.

[14] The performance agent in this case refers to the singer becoming the narrator inside the chanson. This is why, despite the obvious language barrier, some singers of French chansons succeed in capturing all audiences—they are able to convey a song's expressive meaning through their performances, tone, and on-stage personas.

[15] Frith, *Performing Rites*, 182.

[16] Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 1981.

[17] Quotation written on a wall inside the Brel Foundation building in Brussels.

[18] *L'Institut Saint-Louis* is an all-boys catholic Middle and High School in Brussels, Belgium.

[19] Translated from the French: « J'étais premier de classe dans toutes les matières, sauf en Français. Là, c'était Jacques Brel. Il était imbattable. » In 1947—the year after Brel left *L'Institut Saint-Louis*—my maternal grandfather, Désiré Vanhentenryck, immediately took First Place in French Composition.

[20] "Jacques Brel." RFI Musique. Archived from the original on 9 August 2011. Retrieved 6 September 2011.

[21] This opening record, as was typical of 78-rpm albums, contained only one song on each side. The A side offered *IL Y A*, the B side, *La Foire*.

[22] "Rencontre avec Jacques Brel." Productions Jacques Canetti. Accessed August 13, 2020. http://jacques-canetti.com/rencontres/rencontre-avec-jacques-brel/.

[24] These artists included: Guy Béart, Georges Brassens, Juliette Gréco, Serge Gainsbourg, Pierre Perret, Boby Lapointe, Boris Vian, Raymond Devos, Serge Gainsbourg, and Henri Salvador.

[25] Lyrics on page 18.

[26] In French, this is an "oor" sound.

[27] Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency*, 34.

[28] This is specified, in that most of Brel's recordings are presented as vocals with guitar stroke accompaniments.

[29] This effect is remarkably similar to the one Beethoven achieves in the first movement of his Waldstein Sonata. In measure 14, the eighth-note repeated chords are subdivided into sixteenth notes, without changing the harmonies. This gives the impression that the opening phrase has not changed, whilst simultaneously creating the illusion of an increase in tempo.

[30] Brodovitch, Elizabeth. "The Singing Qualities of the French Language." *Journal of Singing*, National Association of Teachers of Singing, 1 Sept. 2007, www.questia.com/library/journal/1P3-1336151681/the-singing-qualities-of-the-french-language.

[31] Fanany, Runa. "THE MUSICALITY OF LANGUAGE: An Application of Musical Analysis to Speech and Writing." *The Journal of Music and Meaning*, Winter 2008, www.musicandmeaning.net/issues/showArticle.php?artID=7.4.

[32] This does not contradict the accentual pattern in the above section. In fact, there is a small accent on "l'amour," but the main accent in the word is on "mour." Additionally, the pitch level goes back down.

[33] The guitar strokes are slightly different, despite projecting the same poetic idea. Instead of being two groups of three triplet-eighth-notes, they are symmetrical long-short-short groupings. There is no real correlation between recordings/scores, which is why I do not specify the note values. I strongly believe that these guitar strokes, given their indefinite note values, were never actually written down but were more of an improvisatory addition. All of Brel's recordings—studio or live—include them, but there are always some slight differences.

[34] This quotation presents the ideas of narrative from several perspectives. I have not included the more obscure variants of narrativity related to mythical, historical, personal, and psychological starting points. Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative*, 38.

[35] Ibid., 39.

[36] Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency*, 79.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 109.

[39] "Terms and Strategies for Patterned Poetry for MUS 331J and 387 L: 'Music and the Poetic Text.'" Prof. Robert S. Hatten, University of Texas at Austin, 2014.

[40] Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency*, 35.

[41] Brel, France, and la Fondation Jacques Brel. *Jacques Brel : Le droit de rêver*. Fondation Jacques Brel, Fondation d'utilité publique : Bruxelles, 2003. (Interview; 16 Octobre, 1961)

[42] Russ, Michael. "Ravel and the Orchestra," in Deborah Mawer, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 133.

[43] Brel, France and la Fondation Jacques Brel. *Jacques Brel : Auteur*, 75.

[44] Ibid.

[45] The equation is written as (3+1) to reflect the repeated line at the end of each quatrain. The final quatrain (+4) is presented separately given the differing rhyme and "inverted" diction (removal of the "dé" negation).

[46] The Poetry Foundation defines an Alexandrine as a "12-syllable iambic line adapted from French heroic stanza." In the poetic analyses of today, an Alexandrine refers to this pattern being replicated for the duration of the oeuvre.

[47] The enharmonic Major chord of G-sharp Major presented here is taken from Ravel's work with Brel varying its function. Whereas it is presented as a functional part of a harmonic sequence with an A-sharp augmented chord in the Ravel, it is principally presented as a chromatically altered coloration in *Les Désespérés.*

[48] European standards for Music Theory are to label tones according to solfège based on fixed *do* (United States utilizes "moveable *do*"). As such, *Sol* in this case refers to G, as the dominant of C, although not behaving as a dominant function.

[49] I write this as an "alteration" because there is no real modulation here (despite the use of V-I in the relative minor). Brel utilizes the relative minor sonority—the minor v chord—in multiple "concluding" cadences. The color of the music changes, but the true key of the piece does not. The use of the minor v is also derived from the Ravel Piano Concerto.

[50] The question of authorship for the scores is not always clear. Brel wrote most of his works with a pen, pencil, and occasionally, a guitar. Although he is also known to have written out piano parts, he usually limited himself to writing out harmonic progressions and simple melodic lines. As the harmonies came from Ravel in the case of *Les Désespérés*, Brel likely decided on their use himself.

[51] Jeric, *Portrait of a Life: Analysis of the Ravel Piano Concerto in G*. BM thesis, Kent State University Honors College, 2011.

[52] It is worth noting that the instrumentation was also done by Gérard Jouannest, Brel's pianist.

[53] Hatten, Robert S. *A Theory of Virtual Agency*.

[54] The most extreme case of tone repetition in *Les Désespérés* is presented in the vocal line of the coda, where the dominant tone B is repeated 12 times successively. In fact, the entire last line is presented on this same tone.

> This musical separation of the coda could possibly be interpreted as a change in the chanson's mathematical equation. The fact that this last line is depicted as its own separate coda could transform the +4 as +3+1 into two separate entities.

[55] I discussed the issue extensively with France Brel's husband during my visit at the Brel Foundation. France Brel, too, is disappointed not to have an answer to this question. This lack of resolution opens the door for further research.

[56] Although not from the song itself, these exact words appear in Brel's chanson *Fils de….* In fact, the very first line reads "Fils de bourgeois," a self-reference which adds a layer of awareness to the song.

[57] Due to lung cancer, at the time of recording *Les F…* (and indeed most of his last album, *Les Marquises*), Brel had only one lung. As a listener, it is difficult to tell the difference in vocal execution, even when the text runs by as quickly as modern-day rap music.

[58] A similar pun occurs with the word "Milan." While referencing the Italian city in the text (in comparison to New York City), phonetically Milan also sounds like "mille ans," or "a thousand years." It is likely a reference to Nazi Germany's *Tausendjähriges Reich* (Thousand-Year Reich).

[59] "Quatrains" is put in quotation marks because of the two extra repetitions at the end of each stanza. The text is an exact repetition, and the music is an exact match; therefore, I consider these repetitions simple add-ons for emphasis rather than structural elements. Thus, the separation in the mathematical equation.

[60] The bold in "a**voir**" indicates the accentual emphasis of the word. This is why the "a" is not written in bold font.

[61] Purl and plain/knit stitches refer to the direction in which the stitch is made. Both part of the generalized pattern of knitting, the purl stitch is the backward-facing stitch while the plain stitch is the forward-facing stitch.

[62] This knitting pattern ("And a purl stitch, And a plain stitch") is reproduced in the poem's structural patterning and in the musical patterning. In several ways, one can view Brel's intricate use of contrary motion as altering the direction of the stitch. In the end, these "stitches" are what hold the musical discourse (and the poetic text) together.

[63] There are several examples of Brel only having a score as a guideline. The scores are accurate as far as the music goes, but Brel does not appear to use them.

[64] *Brel : Comme quand on était beau*. Directed by Jacques Brel. Universal/Barclay, 2003. 3-DVD Box Set.

[65] The reason why the piano is out of tune ties in with the poem's text. The music is out of tune, just like the narrator seems to be out of touch with reality. It is obvious that mom will never return, yet the narrator insists that she will. Thus, the intense sense of naiveté.

[66] "Sentence sounds" refer to the concept of the natural sounds of language as developed by the poet Robert Frost. B. J. Sokol and Marie Borroff suggest that "Frost's poetic imitation of his *abstract* 'sound of sense' involves rather the poet's (and not the expressive reader's) production of certain progressive aural harmonies." (Emphasis in original). B. J. Sokol and Marie Borrof, "Robert Frost's *Sound of Silence*" Vol. 107, No. 5 (October, 1992), 1283-1285.

[67] Bard-Schwarz, David, and Richard Lawrence Cohn. *David Lewin's Morgengruss: Text, Context, Commentary.* Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2015.

"Differing analyses" refers to different interpretations of the same music. For example, Lewin presents more than twenty interpretations for the F in the melodic line of measures 7-9. The magic of the essay lies in Lewin's presentation of ideas, which allow the reader to fully connect with any of the interpretations. He does not explicitly say that one interpretation is better than the other but instead allows the readers to choose what they feel works best for them.

[68] The differences will arise by listening to different recordings. These changes usually include dynamics, pedaling, or even adding a few ornaments for flavor. Schubert, however, left it entirely up to the interpreter.

[69] This is not the only term for the concept used here. Several authors have assigned the following phrases, each with slightly different intentions:

> "**Dynamic curve**"
> Ratner, Leonard. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style.* New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1966.
>
> Agawu, Kofi. "Structural 'Highpoints' in Schumann's *Dichterliebe*." *Music Analysis* 3, No. 2.; 159-80. 1984.
>
> Cooper, Paul. *Perspectives in Music Theory: An Historical-Analytical Approach.* New York, NY: Dodd and Mead, 1974.
>
> "**Narrative curve**"
> Childs, Barney. "Time and Music: A Composer's View." *Perspectives of New Music* 15, no. 2: 194-219. 1977.
>
> "**Curve of Force**"
> Newman, William S. "The Climax of Music." Music Review 13; 283-92. 1952.
>
> "**Wave Line**"
> Toch, Ernst. *The Shaping Forces in Music: An Inquiry into the Nature of Harmony, Melody, Counterpoint Form.* New York, NY: Criterion Music. 1958.
>
> "**Expressive Crux"**
> Hatten, Robert S. *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation.* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 152.

[70] Stell, *Rachmaninov's Expressive Strategies*,14.

[71] Throughout his childhood, Brel was fascinated by the Wild West, the Far West, and Native Indian traditions. He even wrote a song which encapsulates this world precisely (*L'enfance* –

BOF *"Le Far West")*, and very often tried to imagine the world through this self-ideological perspective.

[72] I do not include Stell's curve diagram since he uses this example as a comparison to the C-sharp minor Prelude. I do not fully agree with his assessment of the D-Major Prelude as being a reversal. Also, Stell does not explicitly draw out the dynamic curve but rather explains the differences with the previous example. The reader is then inclined to draw out their own diagram, as I have done.

[73] This chanson was never recorded in studio form.

[74] Childs, "Time and Music," 194-219.

[75] Ibid.

[76] "**Expressive Crux"**
Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 152.

[77] Childs, "Time and Music," 203. According to Childs, the Aaron Copland quote is from the following source: Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (London, 1959).

[78] Ibid., 194-219.

[79] While I used the original recording from 1964, this is only one of three recordings that were ever produced. In fact, there is no concrete proof that Brel performed it more than that. There are some interpretive variations, but they are not significant—the analyses hold up for each of these recordings.

[80] "Terms and Strategies for Patterned Poetry for MUS 331J and 387 L: 'Music and the Poetic Text.'" Prof. Robert S. Hatten, University of Texas at Austin, 2014.

[81] Stell, *Rachmaninov's Expressive Strategies,* 37.

[82] Hatten, Interpreting Musical Gestures, 233.

[83] Ibid., 109.

[84] A more accurate approach would be to assess this at the intervallic level. Some recordings, as in other examples, are presented in either a different key or a different tuning. This does not change the claim presented, however.

[85] Although there were often changes in tempi (but no tempo marks in the score), Brel rarely deviated from his chosen tempo. This is especially surprising when you watch him perform live, given his naturally exuberant personality—he was always quite jittery, yet still sang with so much grace.

[86] Programmatic music may seem like an unusual word choice as I do not relate the term to the traditional definition of "instrumental music." Instead, I bring out the natural narrative aspect of music, allowing the dynamic curve to capture the trajectory of the narrative and performative agents.

[87] Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination.* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. 1981.

[88] Frith, *Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*, 163-64.

[89] Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency*, 35.

[90] Stell, *Rachmaninov's Expressive Strategies*, 78.

[91] Thomson, Graeme. "Graeme Thomson on the Legendary Jacques Brel." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 6 Feb. 2009, www.theguardian.com/music/2009/feb/06/jacques-brel.

[92] Frith, *Rites*, 172.

[93] Ibid.

Appendix

	Mathematical (poetic) Equation	**Musical Arranger(s)**
Quand on n'a que l'amour	2[4(5)] + 4	Brel
Les Désespérés	4(3 + 1) + 4	Ravel/Brel/Jouannest
Les F…	1 + 3(10)	João Donato and Caetano Veloso
La Dame patronnesse	5(6 + 4)	Brel
Quand maman reviendra	[4(2 + 9 + 1)] + 4	Brel/François Rauber
Ne me quitte pas	5(12 + 4) + 5	Brel
Mon enfance	4(14) + 1 + 1	Brel
Amsterdam	4(4) + 3(16) + 2	Brel
Ces gens-là	3(23) + 43	Brel

AMSTERDAM

Dans le port d'Amsterdam
Y a des marins qui chantent
Les rêves qui les hantent
Au large d'Amsterdam
Dans le port d'Amsterdam
Y a des marins qui dorment
Comme des oriflammes
Le long des berges mornes
Dans le port d'Amsterdam
Y a des marins qui meurent
Pleins de bière et de drames
Aux premières lueurs
Mais dans le port d'Amsterdam
Y a des marins qui naissent
Dans la chaleur épaisse
Des langueurs océanes

Dans le port d'Amsterdam
Y a des marins qui mangent
Sur des nappes trop blanches
Des poissons ruisselants
Ils vous montrent des dents
À croquer la fortune
À décroisser la lune
À bouffer des haubans
Et ça sent la morue
Jusque dans l'cœur des frites
Que leurs grosses mains invitent
À revenir en plus
Puis se lèvent en riant
Dans un bruit de tempête
Referment leur braguette
Et sortent en rotant

Dans le port d'Amsterdam
Y a des marins qui dansent
En se frottant la panse
Sur la panse des femmes
Et ils tournent et ils dansent
Comme des soleils crachés
Dans le son déchiré
D'un accordéon rance
Ils se tordent le cou
Pour mieux s'entendre rire
Jusqu'à ce que tout à coup
L'accordéon expire
Alors, le geste grave
Alors, le regard fier
Ils ramènent leur batave
Jusqu'en pleine lumière

Dans le port d'Amsterdam
Y a des marins qui boivent
Et qui boivent et reboivent
Et qui reboivent encore
Ils boivent à la santé
Des putains d'Amsterdam
De Hambourg ou d'ailleurs
Enfin, ils boivent aux dames
Qui leur donnent leur joli corps
Qui leur donnent leur vertu
Pour une pièce en or
Et quand ils ont bien bu
Se plantent le nez au ciel
Se mouchent dans les étoiles
Et ils pissent comme je pleure
Sur les femmes infidèles

Dans le port d'Amsterdam
Dans le port d'Amsterdam.

Auteur-compositeur : Jacques Brel.

NB Enregistrée à L'Olympia en 1964, cette chanson ne l'a pas été en studio, sauf pour la télévision polonaise en 1966.

CES GENS-LÀ

D'abord
D'abord, y a l'aîné
Lui qui est comme un melon
Lui qui a un gros nez
Lui qui sait plus son nom
Monsieur, tellement qu'i boit
Ou tellement qu'il a bu
Qui fait rien d'ses dix doigts
Mais lui qui n'en peut plus
Lui qui est complètement cuit
Et qui s'prend pour le roi
Qui se saoule toutes les nuits
Avec du mauvais vin
Mais qu'on retrouve matin
Dans l'église qui roupille
Raide comme une saillie
Blanc comme un cierge de Pâques
Et puis qui balbutie
Et qui a l'œil qui divague
Faut vous dire, Monsieur
Que chez ces gens-là
On ne pense pas, Monsieur
On ne pense pas, on prie

Et puis, y a l'autre
Des carottes dans les ch'veux
Qui a jamais vu un peigne
Qui est méchant comme une teigne
Même qu'i donnerait sa ch'mise
À des pauv'gens heureux
Qui a marié la Denise
Une fille de la ville
Enfin, d'une autre ville
Et que c'est pas fini
Qui fait ses p'tites affaires
Avec son p'tit chapeau
Avec son p'tit manteau
Avec sa p'tite auto
Qui aimerait bien avoir l'air
Mais qu'a pas l'air du tout
Faut pas jouer les riches
Quand on n'a pas le sou
Faut vous dire, Monsieur
Que chez ces gens-là
On ne vit pas, Monsieur
On ne vit pas, on triche

>>

Et puis, y a les autres
La mère qui n'dit rien
Ou bien n'importe quoi
Et du soir au matin
Sous sa belle gueule d'apôtre
Et dans son cadre en bois
Y a la moustache du père
Qui est mort d'une glissade
Et qui r'garde son troupeau
Bouffer la soupe froide
Et ça fait des grands "flchss"
Et ça fait des grands "flchss"
Et puis, y a la toute vieille
Qui en finit pas d'vibrer
Et qu'on attend qu'elle crève
Vu qu'c'est elle qui a l'oseille
Et qu'on écoute même pas
C'que ses pauv'mains racontent
Faut vous dire, Monsieur
Que chez ces gens-là
On ne cause pas, Monsieur
On ne cause pas, on compte
Et puis, et puis
Et puis, y a Frida
Qui est belle comme un soleil
Et qui m'aime pareil
Que moi j'aime Frida
Même qu'on se dit souvent
Qu'on aura une maison
Avec des tas d'fenêtres
Avec presque pas d'murs
Et qu'on vivra dedans
Et qu'y f'ra bon y être
Et que si c'est pas sûr
C'est quand même peut-être
Pa'c'que les autres veulent pas
Pa'c'que les autres veulent pas
Les autres, i disent comme ça
Qu'elle est trop belle pour moi
Que je suis tout juste bon
À égorger les chats
J'ai jamais tué d'chats
Ou alors y a longtemps
Ou bien j'ai oublié
Ou i sentaient pas bon
Enfin, i veulent pas
Enfin, i veulent pas
Parfois, quand on se voit
Semblant qu'c'est pas exprès
Avec ses yeux mouillants
Elle dit qu'elle partira
Elle dit qu'elle me suivra
Alors, pour un instant
Pour un instant seulement
Alors moi, je la crois, Monsieur
Pour un instant
Pour un instant seulement
Parce que, chez ces gens-là
Monsieur, on s'en va pas
On s'en va pas, Monsieur
On s'en va pas
Mais il est tard, Monsieur
Y faut qu'je rentre
Chez moi.

Auteur-compositeur : Jacques Brel.

LA DAME PATRONNESSE

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Il faut avoir l'œil vigilant
Car, comme le prouvent les événements
Quatre-vingt-neuf tue la noblesse
Car, comme le prouvent les événements
Quatre-vingt-neuf tue la noblesse

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Il faut organiser ses largesses
Car, comme disait le duc d'Elbeuf
"C't'avec du vieux qu'on fait du neuf"
Car, comme disait le duc d'Elbeuf
"C't'avec du vieux qu'on fait du neuf"

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
C'est qu'il faut faire très attention
À n'pas se laisser se voler ses pauvresses
C'est qu'on serait sans situation
À n'pas se laisser se voler ses pauvresses
C'est qu'on serait sans situation

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Il faut être bonne, mais sans faiblesse
Ainsi, j'ai dû rayer de ma liste
Une pauvresse qui fréquentait un socialiste
Ainsi, j'ai dû rayer de ma liste
Une pauvresse qui fréquentait un socialiste

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas

Pour faire une bonne dame patronnesse
Mesdames, tricotez tout en couleur caca d'oie
Ce qui permet, le dimanche, à la grand-messe
De reconnaître ses pauvres à soi
Ce qui permet, le dimanche, à la grand-messe
De reconnaître ses pauvres à soi

Et un point à l'envers
Et un point à l'endroit
Un point pour saint Joseph
Un point pour saint Thomas.

NB Ce texte est celui de l'enregistrement du 11 septembre 1959. Un autre enregistrement a lieu le 24 novembre 1961 dans le même studio Blanqui, avec les différences suivantes : le cinquième couplet et le refrain qui suit ne sont plus repris et, dans le dernier vers du septième couplet, « socialiste » est remplacé par « rouge ». Cette version a été commercialisée dans certaines intégrales.

LES DÉSESPÉRÉS

Se tiennent par la main et marchent en silence
Dans ces villes éteintes que le crachin balance
Ne sonnent que leurs pas, pas à pas fredonnés
Ils marchent en silence, les désespérés

Ils ont brûlé leurs ailes, ils ont perdu leurs branches
Tellement naufragés que la mort paraît blanche
Ils reviennent d'amour, ils se sont réveillés
Ils marchent en silence, les désespérés

Et je sais leur chemin pour l'avoir cheminé
Déjà plus de cent fois, cent fois plus qu'à moitié
Moins vieux ou plus meurtris, ils vont le terminer
Ils marchent en silence, les désespérés

Et en dessous du pont, l'eau est douce et profonde
Voici la bonne hôtesse, voici la fin du monde
Ils pleurent leurs prénoms, comme de jeunes mariés
Et fondent en silence, les désespérés

Que se lève celui qui leur lance la pierre
Il ne sait de l'amour que le verbe s'aimer
Sur le pont n'est plus rien qu'une brume légère
Ça s'oublie en silence, ceux qui ont espéré.

LES F...

Les Flamingants, chanson comique !

Messieurs les Flamingants, j'ai deux mots à vous rire
Il y a trop longtemps que vous me faites frire
À vous souffler dans l'cul pour dev'nir autobus
Vous voilà acrobates, mais vraiment rien de plus
Nazis durant les guerres et catholiques entre elles
Vous oscillez sans cesse du fusil au missel
Vos regards sont lointains, votre humour est exsangue
Bien qu'y ait des rues à Gand qui pissent dans les deux langues
Tu vois, quand j'pense à vous, j'aime que rien ne se perde
Messieurs les Flamingants, je vous emmerde

Vous salissez la Flandre, mais la Flandre vous juge
Voyez la mer du Nord, elle s'est enfuie de Bruges
Cessez de me gonfler mes vieilles roubignoles
Avec votre art flamand italo-espagnol
Vous êtes tellement, tellement beaucoup trop lourds
Que quand, les soirs d'orage, des Chinois cultivés
Me demandent d'où je suis, je réponds fatigué
Et les larmes aux dents, "Ik ben van Luxembourg"
Et si, aux jeunes femmes, on ose un chant flamand
Elles s'envolent en rêvant aux oiseaux rose et blanc

Et je vous interdis d'espérer que jamais
À Londres, sous la pluie, on puisse vous croire anglais
Et je vous interdis, à New York ou Milan
D'éructer, Mes Seigneurs, autrement qu'en flamand
Vous n'aurez pas l'air con, vraiment pas con du tout
Et moi, je m'interdis de dire que je m'en fous
Et je vous interdis d'obliger nos enfants
Qui ne vous ont rien fait, à aboyer flamand
Et si mes frères se taisent, eh bien, tant pis pour elles
Je chante, persiste et signe, je m'appelle Jacques Brel.

MON ENFANCE

Mon enfance passa
De grisailles en silences
De fausses révérences
En manque de batailles
L'hiver, j'étais au ventre
De la grande maison
Qui avait jeté l'ancre
Au nord, parmi les joncs
L'été, à moitié nu
Mais tout à fait modeste
Je devenais Indien
Pourtant déjà certain
Que mes oncles repus
M'avaient volé le Far West

Mon enfance passa
Les femmes aux cuisines
Où je rêvais de Chine
Vieillissaient en repas
Les hommes au fromage
S'enveloppaient de tabac
Flamands, taiseux et sages
Et ne me savaient pas
Moi qui, toutes les nuits
Agenouillé pour rien
Arpégeais mon chagrin
Au pied du trop grand lit
Je voulais prendre un train
Que je n'ai jamais pris

Mon enfance passa
De servante en servante
Je m'étonnais déjà
Qu'elles ne fussent point plantes
Je m'étonnais encore
De ces ronds de famille
Flânant de mort en mort
Et que le deuil habille
Je m'étonnais surtout
D'être de ce troupeau
Qui m'apprenait à pleurer
Que je connaissais trop
J'avais l'œil du berger
Mais le cœur de l'agneau

Et mon enfance éclata
Ce fut l'adolescence
Et le mur du silence
Un matin se brisa
Ce fut la première fleur
Et la première fille
La première gentille
Et la première peur
Je volais, je le jure
Je jure que je volais
Mon cœur ouvrait les bras
Je n'étais plus barbare

Et la guerre arriva

Et nous voilà ce soir.

Auteur-compositeur : Jacques Brel.

QUAND MAMAN REVIENDRA

Quand ma maman reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand elle reviendra, maman
Qui c'est qui s'ra content, c'est moi
Elle reviendra comme chaque fois
À cheval sur un chagrin d'amour
Et pour mieux fêter son retour
Toute la sainte famille s'ra là
Et elle me r'chantera les chansons
Les chansons que j'aimais tellement
On a tellement besoin d'chansons
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Quand mon frère, y reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand y reviendra, l'Fernand
Qui c'est qui s'ra content, c'est moi
Y reviendra de sa prison
Toujours à cheval sur ses principes
Y r'viendra, et toute l'équipe
L'accueillera sur le perron
Et y m'racontera les histoires
Les histoires que j'aimais tellement
On a tellement besoin d'histoires
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Quand ma sœur, elle reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand r'viendra la fille d'maman
Qui c'est qui sera content, c'est moi
Elle reviendra de Paris
Sur le cheval d'un prince charmant
Elle reviendra, et toute la famille
L'accueillera en pleurant
Et elle me redonnera son sourire
Son sourire que j'aimais tellement
On a tellement besoin d'sourires
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Quand mon papa reviendra
C'est mon papa qui s'ra content
Quand y r'viendra en gueulant
Qui c'est qui s'ra content, c'est moi
Y r'viendra du bistrot du coin
À cheval sur une idée noire
Y r'viendra que quand y sera noir
Que quand il en aura b'soin
Et y me redonnera des soucis
Des soucis que j'aime pas tellement
Mais paraît qu'y faut des soucis
Quand y paraît qu'on a vingt ans

Si ma maman revenait
Qu'est-ce qu'y serait content, papa
Si ma maman revenait
Qui c'est qui s'rait content, c'est moi.

Auteur : Jacques Brel
Compositeur : François Rauber.

QUAND ON N'A QUE L'AMOUR

Quand on n'a que l'amour
À s'offrir en partage
Au jour du grand voyage
Qu'est notre grand amour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Mon amour, toi et moi
Pour qu'éclatent de joie
Chaque heure et chaque jour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour vivre nos promesses
Sans nulle autre richesse
Que d'y croire toujours
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour meubler de merveilles
Et couvrir de soleil
La laideur des faubourgs
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour unique raison
Pour unique chanson
Et unique secours

Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour habiller matin
Pauvres et malandrins
De manteaux de velours
Quand on n'a que l'amour
À offrir en prière
Pour les maux de la terre
En simple troubadour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
À offrir à ceux-là
Dont l'unique combat
Est de chercher le jour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour tracer un chemin
Et forcer le destin
À chaque carrefour
Quand on n'a que l'amour
Pour parler aux canons
Et rien qu'une chanson
Pour convaincre un tambour

Alors, sans avoir rien
Que la force d'aimer
Nous aurons dans nos mains
Ami, le monde entier.

NB Dans un enregistrement antérieur, la chanson se termine par : « Ma mie, le monde entier ».

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